

Care and Learning in Higher Education

How society and universities can support care
experienced and estranged students to succeed

Aveek Bhattacharya
Dani Payne

SMF

**Social Market
Foundation**

Care and Learning in Higher Education

How society and universities can support care experienced and estranged students to succeed

Aveek Bhattacharya
Dani Payne

Kindly supported by

**UNITE
STUDENTS**

FIRST PUBLISHED BY

The Social Market Foundation, December 2024
Third Floor, 5-6 St Matthew Street, London, SW1P 2JT
Copyright © The Social Market Foundation, 2024

The moral right of the authors has been asserted. All rights reserved. Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), without the prior written permission of both the copyright owner and the publisher of this book.

THE SOCIAL MARKET FOUNDATION

The Foundation's main activity is to commission and publish original papers by independent academics and other experts on key topics in the economic and social fields, with a view to stimulating public discussion on the performance of markets and the social framework within which they operate. The Foundation is a registered charity (1000971) and a company limited by guarantee. It is independent of any political party or group and is funded predominantly through sponsorship of research and public policy debates. The views expressed in this publication are those of the authors, and these do not necessarily reflect the views of the Social Market Foundation.

CHAIR

Professor Wendy Thomson CBE

DIRECTOR

Theo Bertram

TRUSTEES

Professor Tim Bale
Tom Ebbutt
Caroline Escott
Baroness Oly Grender MBE
Melville Rodrigues

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	4
About the authors	4
Foreword	5
Executive summary	7
Chapter One – Introduction	12
Chapter Two – What are the barriers to care experienced and estranged students succeeding in higher education?	22
Chapter Three – What support exists for care experienced and estranged students and how well does it work?	34
Chapter Four – Recommendations	45
Endnotes	67

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The SMF is grateful to Unite Students for funding this research. The Social Market Foundation retains full editorial independence with respect to its research.

The research team benefitted from the support of a Steering Group including staff and Trustees of the Unite Foundation; a registered charity focussed on Higher Education outcomes for care experienced and estranged students. We would like to thank the Steering Group for their introductions to the range of academics, policy experts, civil society professionals and students who took part in interviews for this project, as well as thanking those individuals for their valuable contribution.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Aveek Bhattacharya

Dr Aveek Bhattacharya is the Research Director of SMF, having joined as Chief Economist in September 2020. Prior to that, he was Senior Policy Analyst at the Institute of Alcohol Studies, researching and advocating for policies to reduce alcohol related harm. He has also previously worked for OC&C Strategy Consultants, advising clients across a range of sectors including retail, consumer goods, software and services.

Aveek studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics at undergraduate level, and has Master's degrees in Politics (from the University of Oxford) and Social Policy Research (from the London School of Economics). He holds a PhD in Social Policy from the London School of Economics, where his thesis compared secondary school choice in England and Scotland.

Aveek is co-editor of the book *Political Philosophy in a Pandemic: Routes to a More Just Future*.

Dani Payne

Dani is a Senior Researcher at the SMF, specialising in tertiary education and skills. Prior to joining, Dani was Policy and Research Manager at Students' Union UCL, leading a team researching policy issues in Higher Education. She also worked as a Researcher at Hertfordshire Students' Union and Columbia University.

Dani holds a BA in Human, Social and Political Sciences from the University of Cambridge.

FOREWORD

Joe Lister, Unite Students CEO & Shân Wareing, Unite Foundation chair

Unite Students and Unite Foundation are proud to build on our long-standing partnership to work together with Social Market Foundation on this report.

Unite Students is the UK's largest owner, manager, and developer of purpose-built student accommodation, serving the country's world-leading higher education sector, and is a champion for estranged and care experienced students.

In 2012, Unite Students set up the Unite Foundation, supporting estranged and care experienced students with a rent-free home at university, and 12 years on remains the charity's principal corporate donor and accommodation partner. Since then, it has donated over £16m to support the full breadth of the charity's work including over 800 students receiving a Unite Foundation accommodation scholarship.

Unite Students' support of this research sits within its wider commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging and wellbeing, which includes its work around its Living Black at University, Meeting the Needs of Neurodivergent Students and Unite Students Applicant Index reports.

The recent Independent Review of Children's Social Care identified five key missions to ensure care experienced people can feel secure: loving relationships; quality education; a decent home; fulfilling work and good health. The review also highlighted how a range of organisations need to be part of supporting children that are, or have been, looked after by the state.

We know that, at aged 19, only 14% of care experienced young people are in university, compared with 47% of the wider population, and that once there, the dropout rate for care experienced students is unacceptably high - 38% compared with 6% of their peers. Estranged young people face similar challenges, but with even less visibility and support available. For all young people without parental support, education often becomes secondary to survival. Society's obligations to care experienced and estranged people should include ensuring more of them can attend and progress in higher education.

Unite Students and Unite Foundation – the only UK charity that supports both estranged and care experienced students, through its nationwide scholarship – strongly believe that action is needed quickly to address access to, progression and success in Higher Education for these groups of students. At the current rate of change, it would take 107 years for care leaver participation to reach the 47% achieved by non-care leavers.

The Unite Foundation scholarship is currently the only intervention for care experienced and estranged students with Office for Students Tier 2 recognised evidence of impact. Independent research shows the impact of the charity's support for Unite Foundation scholarships students means they are as likely as their peers to progress through university and finish with a good degree. In doing so, Unite Foundation, Unite Students and over 30 university partners are already playing a

crucial role so that care experienced and estranged young people have an equal opportunity to go to university and realise their ambitions.

Unite Students and Unite Foundation recognise society's responsibility to students without family support. We commissioned this report to address the urgent need to identify more, actionable ways that support estranged and care experienced students to go to university, progress in higher education study and achieve success.

We look forward to discussing this with Government, Parliament, the Children's social care and youth fields, as well as the HE sector.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There is growing recognition that society's obligations to care experienced and estranged young people involves getting more of them successfully through higher education

- The Independent review of Children's Social Care, chaired by Josh MacAlister, set a target of doubling the proportion of English care leavers attending university, specifically high tariff universities by 2026
- That would follow the Scottish government's tripling of the number of care leavers at Scottish universities as part of its wider "promise" to care leavers

Yet care experienced and estranged students face a number of challenges accessing and progressing through university

- The vast majority of the gap in higher education participation between care leavers and the general population is due to differences in school grades
 - Only 19% of children in care achieve GCSE Maths and English, compared to 65% overall
- Care experienced and estranged students also face material disadvantage:
 - They face particular financial difficulties, although there is some encouraging evidence that scholarships are addressing that
 - They can also have difficulties finding suitable accommodation, especially outside term time and immediately following graduation
- Mental health and wider issues around stigma, confidence and belonging are also obstacles to success at university

There is a remarkable amount of support for care experienced students – at least on paper

- Almost every university offers financial bursaries, the vast majority offer some form of accommodation guarantee, and some offer discounted housing too
- Our best guess estimate is that the university sector spends around £10-15 million a year
- In addition, charitable organisations including the Unite Foundation, The Sutton Trust, Social Mobility Foundation and Into University detail care leavers and occasionally estranged students in their priority groups

Yet the support is inconsistent, and institutions with more care experienced and estranged students have to provide greater levels of support without additional funding

- The majority of universities offer a named contact, but the actual level of support varies depending on caseload, proactivity of support and contact, and training/experience of named contacts.
- There are significant issues with universities' ability to secure student engagement and take up of support

- Some variation and competition between institutions can be a good thing, but there is a clear risk of student choice being motivated by money rather than fit
- Moreover, resources don't seem to track need well, with institutions with fewer care experienced students able to offer greater support

A few programs have been demonstrated to make a significant difference, but there is a clear and pressing need to build a robust evidence base of impact

- Small samples and poor data linkage at every level make it hard to conduct robust causal studies to determine the efficacy of particular interventions
- However, some have produced encouraging results
 - Independent analysis of Unite Foundation scholarship students, who receive free accommodation, found statistically significant outcomes in both progression and grade outcome for care leaver students compared to their peers
- The National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL) has established a 'quality mark', which involves assessing university inputs for care leavers and estranged students against a consistent offer
 - However, progress has been slow while the previous government deliberated over setting up its own kitemark
 - The Quality Mark is also hampered by the absence of impact evidence for the contained inputs

Moreover, the system largely runs on goodwill – which makes it precarious

- Given the budgetary challenges facing the university sector, discretionary spending on care experienced or estranged student support – particularly where unevidenced – may come under pressure

Students at the margins risk falling between the cracks

- Care *leavers* are entitled to financial and pastoral support – particularly from local authorities – that care *experienced* students are not
- Despite facing many of the same challenges as care leaver and care experienced students, *estranged* students are more often overlooked, and harder for institutions to identify and verify, and so many miss out on help

RECOMMENDATIONS

Funding: Institutions should get grant funding for each care experienced and estranged student they admit

- To create a more stable and equitably distributed funding settlement, institutions should receive a minimum £1,000 per year of study for each care-experienced or estranged enrolled student – analogous to the school pupil premium

- Initially, this money should come from the Office for Students' Student Premium fund, though there is also a case for additional government funding.

Funding: Reforms to the student finance system in England should be made to recognise the distinctive financial needs of care experienced and estranged students

- Since most care experienced and all estranged students will not be receiving financial support from parents, the student finance system in England should make two key changes:
 - Student Finance England should provide an additional non-repayable grant to care experienced and estranged students, equivalent to an average parental contribution
 - Student maintenance payments should be increased to cover the full 52 weeks of a year, to lessen the risk of homelessness and financial distress outside of term time

Data: Additional grant funding should come with requirements to follow evidence-led good practice, and support to identify that practice

- Data on care experienced and estranged students should be more freely available to underpin the identification of evidenced best practice
 - Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) should implement a 'flag' for estranged students in England (as in Scotland and Wales)
 - HESA data tables relating to care experience and estrangement should be available alongside other student characteristic data that is freely published annually (i.e. not behind a paywall).
 - UCAS and Student Finance England should develop an opt-out system for the systematic sharing of care or estranged status with universities, so they can readily identify students eligible for support
- To encourage more evidence based practice, the sector should be encouraged to work with TASO, the HE 'what works' centre, to decide how to spend their funds and evaluate their activities
- Institutions should have to include care experienced students in their Access and Participation Plans in the first instance, and ultimately work towards the NNECL Quality Mark, in order to access grant funding
- Research should be commissioned to track progress of care experienced and estranged students at an aggregate level, and assess the effectiveness of schemes like the NNECL Quality Mark.

Access: Efforts should prioritise school attainment and reaching parity in the admission of care experienced and estranged students across the university sector

- With school attainment the main limiting factor on progression to university, the system is not producing sufficient numbers of academically prepared students to hit the Independent Review of Children's Social Care (MacAlister) target of doubling care experienced students

- Structural headwinds (the return to tougher grading following the pandemic, and tighter university finances) will make it harder to sustain progress
- Tutoring schemes, investment in virtual schools and careers guidance can help
- Guaranteed access schemes, such as in Scotland, where care leavers are automatically accepted if they meet the advertised entry requirements can help to mitigate confidence issues, and have tripled student numbers north of the border
- To tackle the underrepresentation of care experienced and estranged students in high-tariff institutions, the Department for Education should identify the top performing care experienced pupils at GCSE level. High tariff universities, supported by DfE, should be tasked with developing a national programme of support for these pupils leading up to university applications including, for example, mentoring, summer schools, special open days/weekends, and perhaps a guaranteed offer. High-tariff institutions must 'lean-in' to this initiative with financial and human resource as an explicit and central plank of their widening participation action.

Responsibility: All Higher Education providers should be signatories to the Care Leaver Covenant to solidify their sense of responsibility for care experienced and estranged students

- The previous government explored the possibility of making universities 'corporate parents', as is the case in Scotland, where it has helped standardise financial assistance, accommodation support, support staff, and pre-entry and transition support.
- However, before taking that step, the Department for Education should encourage more institutions to sign up to the existing Care Leaver Covenant, which provides a framework to support young people across finance, health, education, employment and independent living. Offers, such as provision of a rent guarantor scheme to address student housing barriers, can tackle challenges faced by care experienced and estranged students specific to a local context.

Responsibility: Statutory support provided by Local Authorities should be expanded and standardised

- To address the 'postcode lottery' of local authority support faced by care leavers, the Department for Education should create a universal offer of support that they expect all local authorities to provide for care leavers pursuing higher education. This should include financial and housing support
- To address the age 'cliff-edge' of support drop off that care leavers face, and in recognition that this group often enters university later due to educational disruption, support should be extended until their time of graduation, as long as they have enrolled before they turned 25
- As per the Independent Care Review recommendation, Virtual School oversight and engagement in educational journeys should be extended to age

25 reflecting educational disruption and comparatively low attainment at key stage transitions

	Recommendations
Funding	Introduce a care experienced and estranged Student Premium scheme, offering institutions grant funding for each enrolled student.
	Reform Student Finance England to reflect the needs of care experienced and estranged students, including providing additional non-repayable grants, and extending student finance to cover the full 52 weeks of the year.
Data	Support the development of evidence-led good practice, including by i) expanding the relevant data published by HESA in England including an estrangement flag; ii) requiring institutions to include care experience/estrangement in their APPs and ultimately to work towards the NNECL Quality Mark to access funding; iii) commissioning long term tracking of outcomes for institutions participating in schemes like the Quality Mark.
Access	Introduce ring-fenced funding for tutoring of care experienced pupils in years 1 to 11.
	Prioritise care experienced pupils for a minimum level of personalised careers support in schools.
	High tariff universities, supported by the Department for Education, should develop a targeted support programme for the top performing care leavers at GCSE level, supporting them in years 12 and 13 in the lead up to university application season.
	Introduce a Guaranteed Offer Scheme for care experienced and estranged pupils.
Responsibility	Encourage universities to sign up to the Care Leaver Covenant, ahead of consideration of giving them corporate parenting responsibilities.
	Standardise local authority support and extend support through to graduation for those care leavers that enrol aged 25 or under.

CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

Chapter summary

- There has been increasing political and policy attention on increasing the number of care experienced pupils into higher education. In 2022 the Independent Review of Children’s Social Care chaired by Josh MacAlister set out a mission to double the proportion of care leavers attending university, and particularly the most selective universities.
- Progress in this area has been slow, and not enough attention has been paid to estranged students. The outcomes in higher education remain worse for both of these groups compared to their peers, with care experienced and estranged students more likely to drop-out and less likely to graduate with a first or 2:1.
- This report identifies policy measures to improve these outcomes. We draw on extensive existing literature, as well as twenty interviews undertaken with a range of experts, practitioners and policymakers. We also conducted focus groups with care experienced and estranged students themselves.

There is a growing belief that society’s obligations to care experienced and estranged people involves getting more of them successfully through higher education

“The disadvantage faced by the care experienced community should be the civil rights issue of our time”. Those words come from Josh MacAlister’s review, commissioned by the then Conservative government, and published in 2022.¹ A lot has changed in the subsequent two and half years – not least the election of a new government, with MacAlister now sitting in its ranks as an MP. Yet too little progress has been made to achieve the vision MacAlister, and those before him, had of a society where care experienced people can enjoy loving relationships, quality education, a decent home, fulfilling work and good health.

To that end, the review set out five missions, the second of which was to “double the proportion of care leavers attending university, and particularly high tariff universities, by 2026”. To meet that target, it called for the concept of ‘corporate parenting’, currently applied to local authorities, to be extended to all public bodies. Similarly, the APPG for care-experienced children and young people published a report in March 2024 of their inquiry into corporate parenting stating that there was “widespread support” for educational providers to assume this role.² In other words, institutions like universities and colleges should take shared responsibility for offering care experienced students the support they need to get on in life. This report considers how successfully higher education institutions are currently supporting relevant students, and how they can be helped to do better. In particular, it seeks to

identify immediate and longer term actions the new government can take to work with institutions and regain momentum for this mission.

MacAlister’s missions anticipate the ‘mission-led’ approach promised by the new government in Westminster. Among the objectives it has set itself is to “break down the barriers to opportunity for every child, at every stage and shatter the class ceiling”.³ If the government is to succeed, improving school outcomes for the worst off and putting more people on positive post-school pathways, it must address the challenges facing care experienced and estranged people in the education system.

The shift envisaged by the MacAlister review was already underway in Scotland. Its independent care review was published two years earlier, in February 2020, and was called ‘The Promise’, reflecting the vow made to care experienced children that “You **will** grow up loved, safe and respect. And by 2030, that **promise must be kept**”.⁴ But even before then, The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 created duties and responsibilities upon public bodies, including universities, which were designated corporate parents. This involves accepting responsibility for looked after children and care leavers, seeking the best outcomes for them and making their needs a priority.⁵

The Scottish government has also prioritised increasing the number of care experienced students entering higher education. Its 2016 Commission on Widening Access recognised the particular challenges facing those with care experience, and called for Scotland to be “much bolder in its ambition for, and commitment to, those with care experience”.⁶ On its recommendation, care experienced students are given a guaranteed offer at a higher education institution if they meet the minimum entry requirements, and receive priority among equally qualified applicants.⁷ The Scottish government, through the Student Awards Agency for Scotland, also offers a Care Experienced Bursary – a grant of £9,000 for care experienced students – as well as offering grants of up to £105 per week for accommodation during the summer holidays to address homelessness risk.⁸

The Welsh government, too, has targeted care leavers for support with its basic income pilot, launched in July 2022, providing 18 year olds with £1,600 per month for two years.⁹ Whilst this fixed term scheme has now ended, we await the evaluation from Conservation and Sustainability Consortium of Academic Institutions (CASCADE) on how this impacted on HE access and progression.¹⁰

Definitions and terminology: this report looks at how to improve outcomes for estranged as well as care experienced students

As we shall see, definitions can be crucial in this area, not least insofar as they define the object of policy concern and eligibility for support. There are also understandable sensitivities around labels, and differences between social, institutional and legal uses of different terms. In this report, we cast the net relatively wide, driven in part by our finding that some of the greatest issues are found by those at the fringe or beyond the scope of existing schemes – in other words, we are interested in improving outcomes not just for care leavers or even care experienced students, but also estranged students.

Children whose families are unable or not permitted to care for them are sometimes taken into the care of the state. This care can take different forms, including living with foster carers, in a residential children's home or being looked after at home under a supervision order. This is commonly because of lack of parental capacity, neglect, abuse, addiction or criminality, but can also be because young people are unaccompanied asylum seekers, homeless or orphaned. There are a number of broadly synonymous terms for such children.

- **Looked after child/child looked after/cared for young person/child in care:** terms for children who are, or have been, in the care of their local authority

There are different terms used to describe people who have previously been in care, and faced the associated challenges, but the two most prominent are *care leaver* and *care experienced*:

- **Care leaver:** somebody who has been in care for a specified minimum period, at a specific age and often enters official adulthood at age 18 directly from care
- **Care experienced:** a broader blanket term for all individuals who have been in local authority care at some point during their childhood

The idea of a “care leaver” is often operationalised using formal definitions set out in Acts of Parliament. The most common definition equates it with idea of having been an ‘eligible child’: in care on or after their 16th birthday, and looked after for at least 13 weeks by a local authority after the age of 14.¹¹

The Department for Education (DfE), in its statistics, uses a different definition of “care leaver”: individuals who have either been looked after continuously for 12 months or more three years prior to application, or were a special school pupil who was at least 15 at the beginning of the academic year. In other words, under their definition, to be a care leaver at 18/19, one needs to have been in the care system for at least a year at 15.

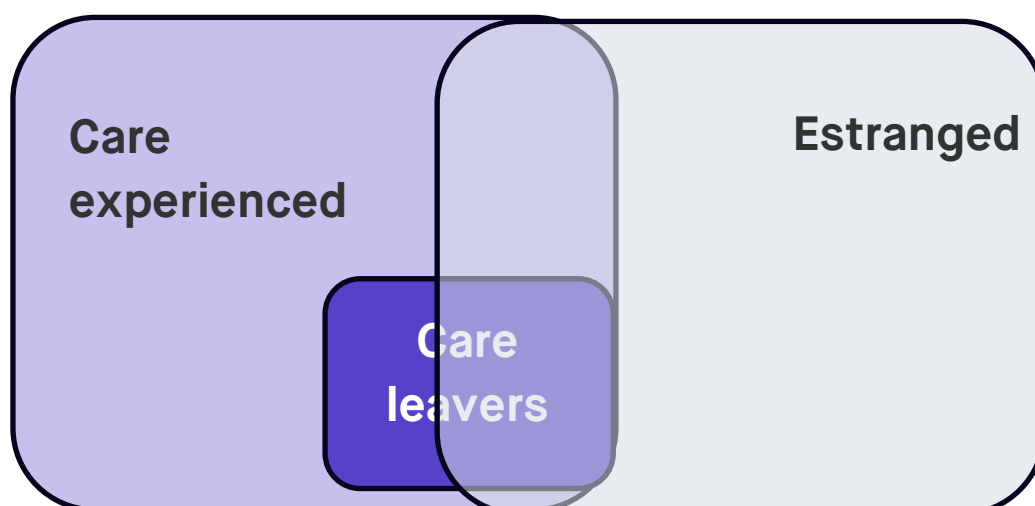
The concept of “care experienced” is often preferred to care leaver, recognising that even short periods in care, or periods in care earlier in childhood, reflect circumstances likely to have had a detrimental effects on an individuals’ wellbeing and life chances.¹² For example, the MacAlister review says that care experienced is its favoured term.¹³ UCAS defines someone with care experience as having “spent time living with foster carers under local authority care, in residential care (e.g. a children’s home), looked after at home under a supervision order, or in kinship care with relatives or friends, either officially (e.g. a special guardianship order) or informally without local authority support”.¹⁴

In recent years, there has been a broadening of focus to include *estranged* students into discussions of care experienced students, recognising that they face many of the same challenges and issues.

- **Estranged:** someone who has no communicative relationship with either of their living biological or adoptive parents, and often their wider family networks.¹⁵

Figure 1 shows how these concepts relate to one another. Care leavers are a subset of care experienced people – those who are in care across their mid-teens. Care leavers and care experienced people may be estranged, but not necessarily. Conversely, many estranged people will not have been in care but some will certainly be care experienced. In this report, we take a broad approach, and are in principle interested in all three: care leavers, care experienced and estranged students.

Figure 1: Definitions and terminology



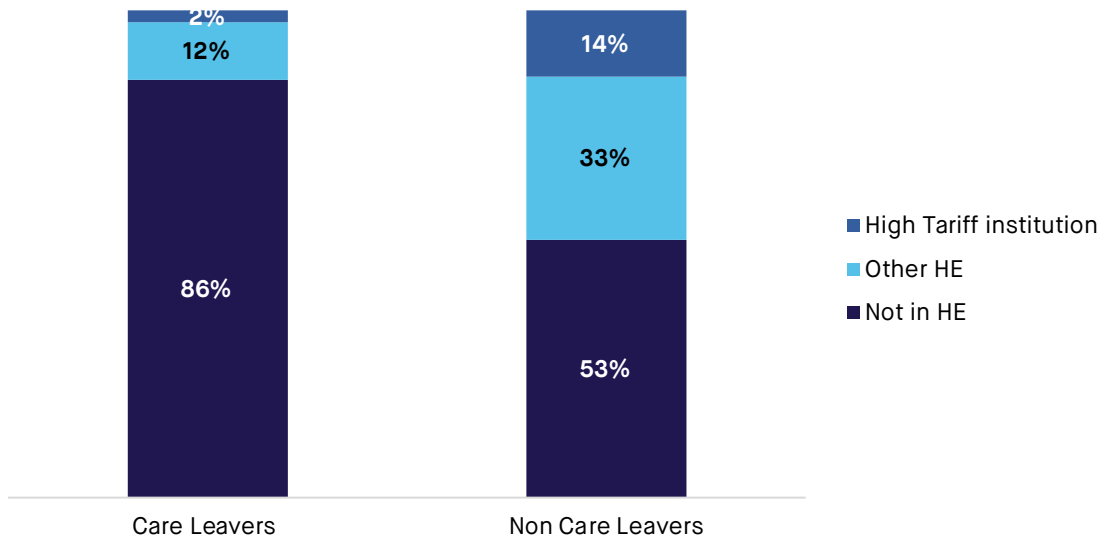
Despite gradual progress, higher education outcomes remain worse for care experienced and estranged students

Care leavers are considerably less likely to go to university than the general population, which is why improving higher education outcomes has been such a focus of efforts to improve their life chances. There is a lot at stake, because going to university can be transformational: whereas care experienced individuals generally earn around a third less than those who have never been in care, care experienced *graduates* earn just 2.5% less than the average graduate.¹⁶ There are also broader social and health benefits for graduates. Individuals who participate in higher education tend to have better mental and physical health, and have greater life satisfaction.¹⁷

The most reliable statistics that we have on care experienced young people's access to higher education come from the Department for Education. They relate to care leavers specifically, defined as young people looked after for at least a year at age 15. They show that 14% of care leavers were in higher education by the age of 19 in 2021/22.¹⁸ That likely underestimates the proportion that *eventually* end up in higher education – UCAS data indicates that around a third of care experienced applicants are over the age of 21¹⁹ – but it is still well below their peers. In 2021/22, 47% of non-care experienced students were in higher education.²⁰ The figure is even lower for

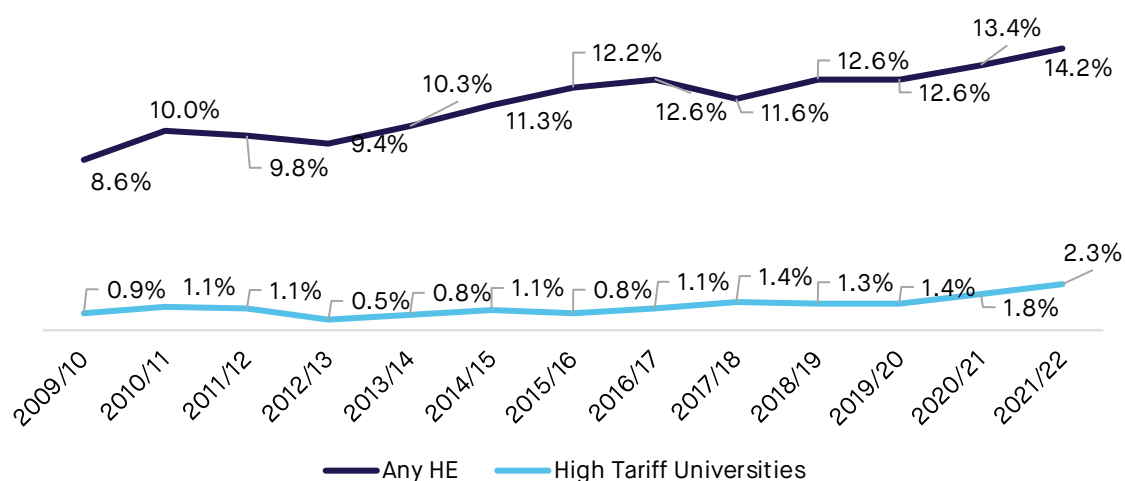
access to elite universities: in 2021/22, only 2% of care leavers were admitted to the most selective ‘high tariff’ universities, compared to 14% of non-care leavers.

Figure 2: Destination of 19 year olds, England 2021/22



Source: Department for Education, *Widening Participation in Higher Education*

As Figure 3 shows, those numbers actually represent an improvement on the recent past. The proportion of care leavers going onto university has gradually increased over the course of a decade or so, up from 9% in 2009/10. The proportion going on to high tariff universities has doubled, albeit from a very low base. This partly reflects a more general increase in participation: the proportion of non care leavers going into HE rose from 34% to 47% over this period. It also reflects a rise in number of children in care: the proportion of school leavers that were care leavers rose 26% between 2009/10 and 2021/22. Nevertheless, care leavers’ share of student numbers rose by more, especially in top tier universities. The share of HE students that are care leavers rose 51%, and the share of high tariff university students rose 113%.

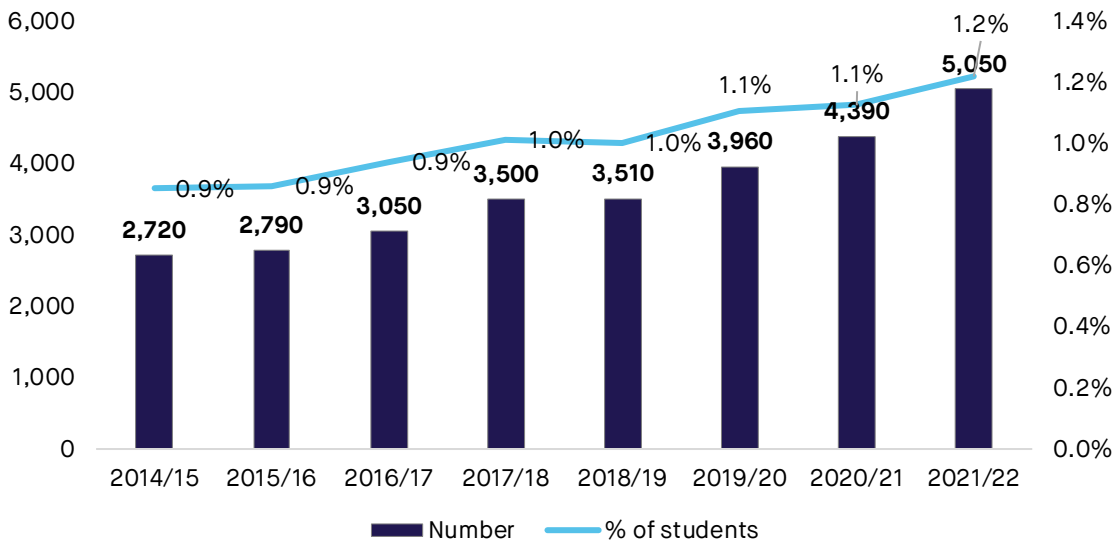
Figure 3: Proportion of care leavers in higher education at age 19, England

Source: Department for Education, *Widening Participation in Higher Education*

Even so, this progress has not been fast enough to give confidence of eventual equity. The think tank Civitas points out that if the growth rate of recent years continues, it will take 107 years for care leaver participation to reach the 47% achieved by non care leavers.²¹

Data on care experienced and estranged students are less robust, but suggests an increase in participation, or perhaps identification, for both. The number of applicants to university or college declaring care experience on the UCAS system doubled between 2008 and 2022, rising from 4,495 to 8,930.²² According to the Office for Students (OfS), the number of UK undergraduate students entering university and self-identifying as care experienced rose from 2,720 in 2014/15 to 5,050 by 2021/22. The proportion that are care experienced is 1.2%, six times higher than the DfE’s estimate of the care leaver share of student population (unsurprisingly, since the “care experienced” category is broader). In total, the OfS count 12,360 UK care experienced undergraduate students (across all years, not just entrants).²³

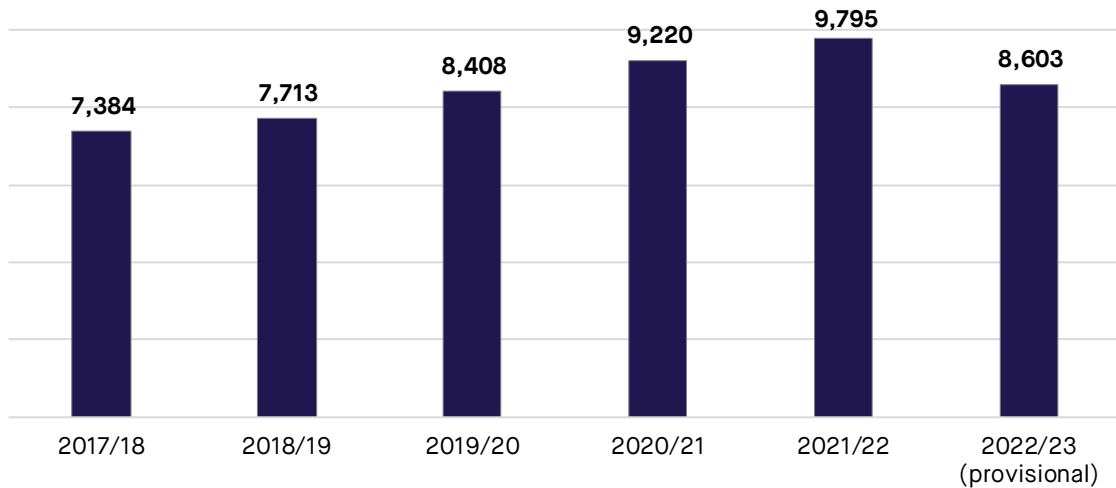
Figure 4: Number and proportion of care experienced UK undergraduate entrants



Note: Participants that did not provide a response are excluded from the analysis
 Source: Office for Students, Population data dashboard

Similarly, provisional data released by the Student Loan Company shows that the number of estranged students applying for ‘independent student’ status in the university sector in England has risen by 17% since 2017/18, although figures for the 2022/23 academic year are down from 2020/21 and 2021/22 (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Number of estranged English applicants to student finance

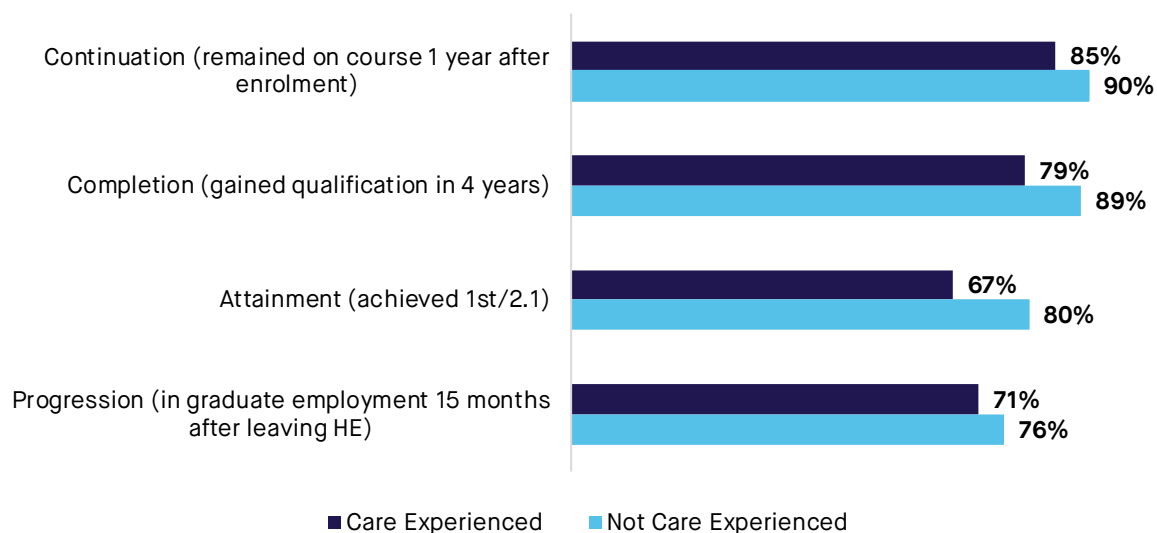


Note: Data represents students who are under the age of 25 and have been approved for means-tested funding. Students may appear in multiple years due to multi-year courses.
 Source: Student Loans Company, Estranged students & care leavers by HEP: AYs 2017/18 - 2022/23

Once they make it into higher education however, care experienced student progression generally stalls, as Figure 6 shows. 15% drop out within the first year, compared to 10% of non care experienced students. 1 in 5 have not completed their

course within four years. Care experienced students get lower degree classifications: two-thirds achieve a first or 2.1, compared to four-fifths of non-experienced students. And care experienced students are less likely to get a graduate job.

Figure 6: HE outcomes for care experienced and non-experienced students, UK, most recent available year



Source: Office for Students, *Student characteristics data: Outcomes data*

Estranged students, similarly, are more likely to drop out and have lower attainment rates. Experimental data from the Office for Students indicates that that continuation rate for estranged students was 8.2 percentage points lower than non-estranged students. The proportion of estranged students achieving a first or a 2:1 is 13 percentage points lower than non-estranged students.²⁴

This report identifies policy measures to improve outcomes for care experienced and estranged students

There is, then, much work to be done if policymakers are to achieve the ambitions for care experienced people in the education system, set out in reports like the MacAlister review and The Promise. Doubling the number of care leavers in higher education, particularly at the most selective universities, will require a dramatic acceleration of progress. As we shall see, there may be real challenge in sustaining current progress. The number of DfE-defined care leavers entering high tariff institutions rose from 50 to 90 between 2020 and 2022, but that was likely driven by issues with school grades following the pandemic, where students were awarded predicted grades, increasing the number meeting university entry requirements. Moreover, as we shall see in the following chapter, the pool of care experienced young people with the school attainment necessary to get into university is shrinking, which will make it harder to hit such targets.

In any case, getting care experienced and estranged people through the door is not enough. They also need specific support to ensure more of them complete their

courses and graduate with a reasonable quality degree that sets them up well for the job market.

Yet there is a sense that momentum has stalled since the publication of the MacAlister review. This might be attributed to the fact that it was commissioned by a government on its way out of office – though it did publish a response, *Stable Homes, Built on Love*, and consulted on the best way forward.²⁵

With a new government now in office, this report identifies the measures it should take to ensure care experienced and estranged students can access and thrive in higher education. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

- What are the distinctive needs of estranged and care experienced students in understanding, reaching and succeeding in tertiary education?
- What existing activities are trying to address these needs, which are most successful/effective, and what systemic issues are challenges or barriers in addressing these needs?
- What can policymakers, educational institutions and other organisations do to improve estranged and care experienced students' chances of success?
- How much would any initiatives cost, and what would the potential economic and social benefits be?
- How do these initiatives map onto current windows for change?

It does so by means of a thorough literature review, covering policy documents, academic papers and think tank/charity reports. We have also conducted 20 interviews with a range of experts, practitioners and policymakers, including representatives of government, educational institutions and researchers. In addition, we conducted a focus group of care experienced and estranged young people, to canvass their experiences and perceptions of different policy options (in addition to student voice within the literature).

Interviewee type	Number of interviews undertaken
Civil Society	7
Care experienced and estranged students	6
Policy & government	5
Higher Education	5
Academic researcher	3

In this report, we focus primarily on universities and higher education in England, though in some places we touch on further education colleges and devolved administrations since many of the challenges are shared. That is simply to keep the scope of the report and research manageable, and no reflection on the importance of non-university educational routes.

The rest of the report is organised as follows:

- **Chapter Two** explores the barriers and challenges that care experienced and estranged students face in higher education

- **Chapter Three** maps the range of support available to care experienced and estranged students, and begins to evaluate how well it works, and how it might be improved
- **Chapter Four** sets out policy recommendations and implications for practice

CHAPTER TWO – WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO CARE EXPERIENCED AND ESTRANGED STUDENTS SUCCEEDING IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

Chapter summary

- School attainment is the biggest barrier for care experienced students accessing university. Only 19% of children in care passed English and Maths GCSE in 2022/23, compared to 65% of all pupils.
- Once in higher education, care experienced and estranged students face greater material challenges with housing and money.
 - Consequently, their decision over where or whether to study is often driven by the support on offer as much as their educational or career aspirations.
- The transition from local authority care to university can throw up a number of logistical challenges and breaks in support.
- Care experienced and estranged students are more ‘marginal’: more uncertain about their decision to attend university than their peers, and less confident.

Care experienced and estranged students face an array of distinctive challenges that make it harder for them to enter and thrive in higher education. It is those barriers that justify the specific attention and support for such students.

Across our reading and interviews, we were able to group four different types of issues, which this chapter explores in turn:

- Academic preparation
- Material disadvantage: accommodation and finance
- Psychological needs
- Tough transitions

School attainment is the biggest barrier to accessing higher education, and makes it harder to succeed in university

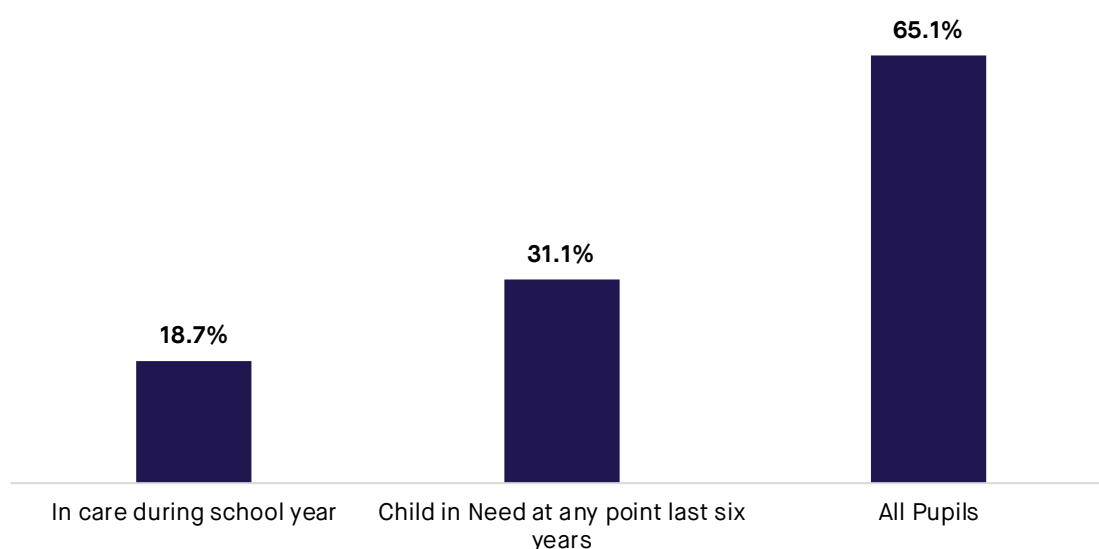
Across our interviews, whenever we asked experts to list the most significant obstacles for care experienced and estranged students accessing higher education, invariably the first thing they raised was prior school attainment at traditional key stage transitions.

*“In terms of increasing the proportion of care experienced young people going on to higher education, **the single biggest thing can do is improve their attainment at 16.** By that point in the conveyor belt, or whatever metaphor you want to use, everything is pretty much fixed.” Academic*

*“In the literature [the barrier to access] is very much qualification level. **Care experienced people are less likely to have the qualifications to access universities** because of disrupted schooling, moving around different homes, changing schools.” Academic*

Due to their adverse childhood experience, not enough care experienced and estranged young people get the grades to get in to university, and to do well when they are there. In 2022/23, 9% of children who were in care during the year of their GCSEs achieved “good passes” (grade 5 or above) in English and Maths. For the broader category of anybody that had been a child in need in the past six years, the proportion was 17%. Across the entire pupil population, the proportion was 45%.²⁶ As Figure 7 shows, there are similar gaps in terms of achieving grade 4.

Figure 7: Proportion of pupils achieving grade 4 (Pass) or better in English and Maths, 2022/23



Source: Department for Education, *Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England*; SMF analysis

It is not strictly necessary to achieve any particular grade at Key Stage 4 (GCSEs and equivalent) in order to attend university. When the previous government proposed minimum eligibility requirements, they were to be set at grade 4 passes in Maths and English – though around 1 in 10 university students do not achieve that benchmark.²⁷ All the same, the fact that only 19% of children in care pass GCSE English and Maths at 16 (though more may achieve those qualifications later in life), and 14% care leavers are already in higher education suggests that there is a limited pool of qualified students. Similarly, while it is not strictly necessary to have A Levels to attend university, the fact that an estimated 15% of looked after children and 22% of care experienced young people study for A Levels, suggests a limited pipeline.²⁸ Without a substantial improvement in performance, achieving the MacAlister review’s ambition of doubling care leavers in higher education looks challenging to say the least.

These differences in school grades account for the vast majority of the gap in higher education participation between care leaver and other students. According to

analysis by Neil Harrison of a cohort of students that entered HE in the early 2010s, care leavers were 69% less likely than non-care leavers to get to university, but accounting for Key Stage 4 attainment plus other demographic factors reduces this to 11%.²⁹ To put this another way, Harrison shows that 71% of care leavers that achieved eight or more GCSE passes went onto higher education, compared to 76% of the general population that achieved those grades. For those with five passes including English and Maths, 59% went into HE compared to 68% overall.

School attainment remains, then, *the* fundamental obstacle to care experienced people accessing higher education, and the biggest limiting factor on individual and social aspirations. While there may be some things that the university sector can do to help improve it, it is first and foremost an issue for schools, colleges and the care system. We heard regularly about the level of disruption that school students face, and how this makes it harder for them to flourish in the high stakes, often time fixed, assessments that decide whether they can get into higher education.

*“[Care experienced students] might change school, they might live out of area. They might be trying to contend with moving homes, you know, so then **education often becomes secondary to survival**, if you like. If you’re moving school, four or five times, young people reported that they were often more bothered about finding friends and people to, you know, hang around with rather than concentrating on particular subjects.” Academic*

“One of the things that we know is very, very common for care experienced young people in school is they miss school for lots of different reasons, either because of health reasons or because of placement changes. And so that school is often a place of success and safety, but it’s also disrupted.” Academic

Even for those who make it over the threshold into university, barriers to picking up necessary knowledge, skills and confidence at school can put them at a disadvantage. This is reflected in their confidence going in: across the 2023 and 2024 Unite Applicant Index surveys of prospective students³⁰, 59% of care leavers said they think they will struggle to keep up with other students on the course, compared to 39% overall.³¹ To some extent this anxiety may be well placed – as noted in the previous chapter, two-thirds of care experienced students achieve a first or 2:1, compared to four-fifths of non care experienced students.

Care experienced and estranged students face greater material challenges with housing and money

The most obvious form of disadvantage that care experienced and estranged students face – and the ones that support measures invariably prioritise to target – is in their material circumstances. Often without recourse to a family home and financial support, care experienced and estranged students face particular housing and financial issues.

Housing

Issues with securing affordable, suitable and stable accommodation was raised in much of our reading and many of the conversations we had as being particularly

challenging for care experienced and estranged students. Much of university life and systems works around the assumption that students have a family home. For example, the fact that student finance in England does not cover the whole calendar year was raised in interviews as an illustration of the assumptions made, in that case presuming that students will return to a family home during summer. Being care experienced, and even more so being estranged, increases the likelihood of not having such a reliable housing situation. These distinctive challenges of care experienced and estranged students come over and above the more general issues that all types of students face with finding suitable, affordable and convenient accommodation.

Care experienced and estranged students are slightly less likely to live in halls of residence: 33% of care leavers and 31% of estranged students do so, compared to 35% of the general student population. They are quite a bit more likely to live alone – especially (understandably) estranged students, 13% of whom are on their own, compared to 9% of care leavers and 6% of all students. Perhaps as a result, they tend to live further away from campus: 58% of care experienced and 50% of estranged students live over 10 miles from their university, compared to a third overall.³² This may partly be because, for those receiving support from a local authority, they may prioritise taking housing offered to them by their LA over finding accommodation close to their university. In interviews and focus groups there was a sense that care experienced students in particular make decisions primarily based on their need for stability over what is best for their education.

“Students were making decisions based on [support advertised] and then getting to university, and not all of it materialized, and they felt very annoyed by that, because if they'd have known, then they would have chosen somewhere else. I had a couple of students say to me ‘if I'd have known they didn't offer this support that they said they'd offer, I would have gone to X’, and it usually was a high tariff university they didn't go to.” Academic

In general, student accommodation does not always meet the needs of care experienced and estranged students. In particular, there are issues with accommodation around term time: at the beginning and end of their studies, as well as in holidays. Along with the wider orientation and transitional difficulties that they face, sorting out accommodation on arrival can be particularly tricky. A common issue for those that are in halls is having somewhere to stay during holiday closure periods. While care experienced and estranged students are more likely to rely on the private sector, they can face difficulties with getting the money together for a deposit if they don't have family financial support and are unable to source a rent guarantor. Even when they do find somewhere to stay, it may not be appropriate. For example, those with parental experiences of drug and alcohol problems may find themselves exposed to things they would prefer to avoid.³³ 27% of care experienced students report finding drug and alcohol culture at university excessive.³⁴ There are also challenges for care experienced and estranged students after they graduate, but still need a base from which to apply for jobs before they get an income. This has been called the “cliff-edge”, where care experienced students lose the university support

they were entitled to at graduation and do not have sufficient support from other sources to secure stable housing and progress into work or further study.³⁵

Financial insecurity

Financial challenges, especially when care experienced and estranged students were not receiving accommodation support, came up regularly across our interviews, including some troubling and harrowing testimony from the students we spoke to, and from those who work with them. These students often start from a position of financial vulnerability, which can be exacerbated by disruption to financial support, or failure to claim entitlements.

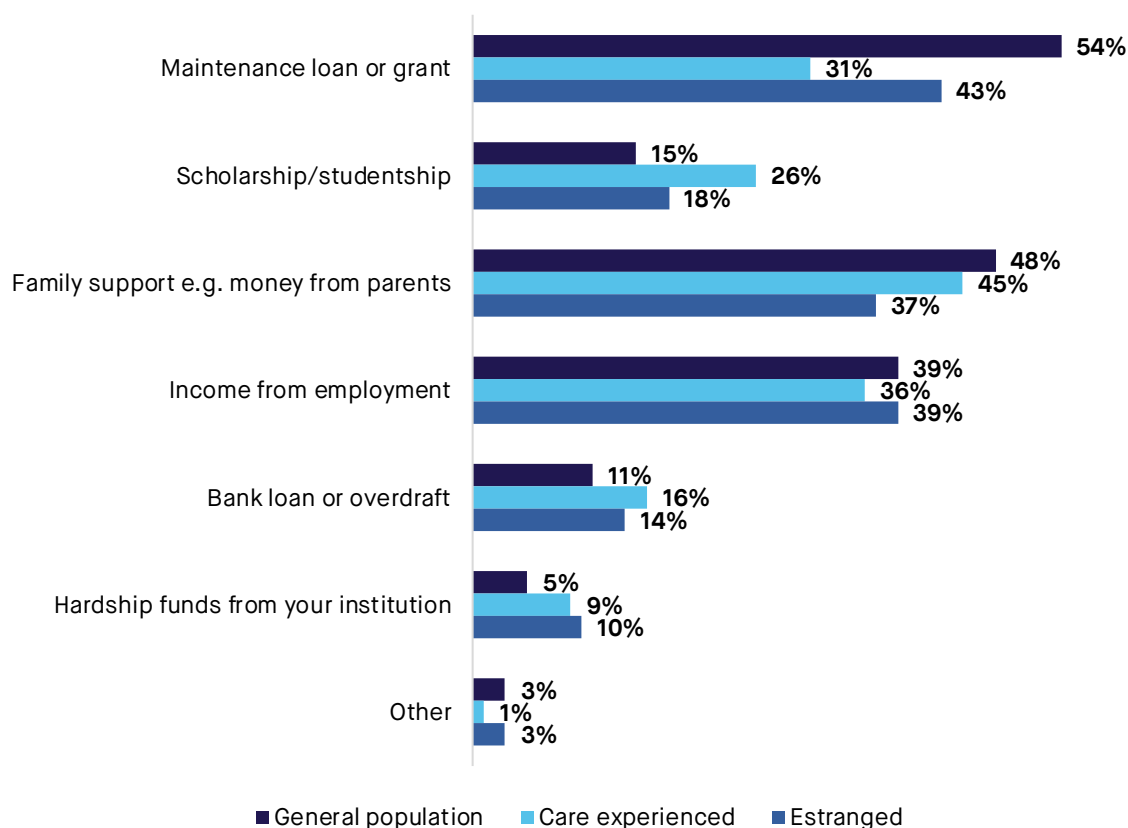
*“Everything for us is on the line, like a house, a job, bursaries. All these things are in our brain – we need to get good grades, otherwise they’ll take us off the scholarship or whatever. And [other students] are just jumping around with money falling out of their pockets. I think that was like, the main thing for me, where I was just like, **wow, I am not like these people.**” Student*

*“I had actually ended up with my laptop broke February 2023, and it was probably my worst nightmare. I was told that I had to upgrade my laptop so that I could use it for the software on my course, and I didn’t have the money for that. [...] I didn’t have any money left in their grant pot. They were like, ‘we can only give you a loan’, and I can’t find a way to pay that back. [...] **I’m always living week to week.** If any unexpected expenses come up like, say, dentistry, I can’t afford to go to the dentist. **I can barely afford next week’s shopping.**” Student*

However, the Unite Applicant Index suggests things are not so clear cut. 55% of care leavers say that financial issues are currently affecting their mental health, compared to 38% overall. Paradoxically, care leavers are also more likely to say they will have enough money to cover their costs at university: 56% of care leavers expected that to be the case, compared to 45% of the overall applicant base.

There are a few possible explanations for these data points. This could reflect adaptive expectations: plausibly care experienced students may be more prepared and adjusted to financial hardship. Conversely, it could reflect greater optimism on the part of care experienced students, perhaps anticipating that their financial circumstances with access to student finance will be better than they are used to. It almost certainly reflects the broader cost of living crisis, which means that students of all sorts are increasingly worried about paying the bills.

However, the most encouraging explanation (from the perspective of care leaver students if not the wider population) is that this reflects the effectiveness of existing financial support. As we shall describe in the following chapter, there is a significant amount of relatively generous funding on offer for care experienced students, and it is plausible that this is cushioning the blow more effectively than for the rest of their cohorts. There is some evidence for this theory in the Higher Education Policy Institute’s Student Academic Experience Survey. Figure 8 shows the different sources of income students report using to cover their living costs. Care experienced students are much more likely to report receiving scholarships and studentships (26% to 15% overall), and less likely to rely exclusively on maintenance loans.

Figure 8: Which of the following do you use to cover your living costs?

Source: HEPI, Student Academic Experience Survey 2024; SMF analysis

Notice, however, that estranged students are closer to the general population than care experienced students in terms of their sources of income, with only 18% receiving scholarships (and indeed fewer getting support from family). Their difficult position, betwixt and between, seems to be reflected in the Unite survey, where only 33% say they have enough money to cover their costs at university.

Mental health and wider issues around confidence and belonging are also obstacles to success at university

Mental health

Mental health support was a central part of the MacAlister review, reflecting the significant challenges that care experienced young people face, often including dealing with trauma.³⁶ However, while it might be assumed that care experienced and estranged students face worse mental health than their peers, that is not clearly the case. With the caveat of small samples (particularly for estranged students), across the last two Unite Applicant Index surveys, 18% of care leaver students have reported a mental health condition, comparable to 19% of all applicants – although estranged students were much higher with 30%. Care experienced students' rate of depression is 24% – no different from the overall average – and anxiety is lower – 31% vs 38%. Estranged students do worse on all outcomes.³⁷ Moreover, those findings are at odds with HEPI's Student Academic Survey, which finds that average

reported anxiety out of 10 (where 10 is greater) was 5.3 for those who had been in local authority care compared to 4.5 for those who had not been, and 5.0 for estranged students versus 4.45 for those who were not estranged.³⁸ Although, of course, it is important to note that this could also reflect differences in mental health between applicants (the sample drawn from for the Unite Index) and current students (HEPI's Student Academic Survey).

However, it does seem that mental health issues can be more severe or debilitating for care experienced and estranged students. Around half of care experienced and estranged applicants in the Unite survey say they have missed some school for mental health reasons, considerably more than have a reported condition. This may be due to issues accessing medical care and diagnosis. Interviewees raised concerns that those in the care system who may have a mental health condition or learning difficulty may not be diagnosed until later in life, because disruption to schooling and frequent moves can make it harder for teachers and caregivers to spot issues early in childhood. Furthermore, some (although certainly not all) care experienced or estranged students will have experienced medical neglect, which can also delay identification of symptoms and diagnosis.

In any case, care experienced and estranged students are liable to be caught up in the wider issues surrounding mental health support in higher education. The proportion of university applicants declaring a mental health condition has increased from 1.2% to 7.5% in less than a decade.³⁹ Practitioners in university mental health services also report that a larger proportion of students face complex and long-term mental health conditions. Meanwhile, students (like the broader public) can struggle to access NHS services: 35% of young people seeking mental health support are either on a waiting list or unable to access support.⁴⁰

There is a growing expectation that institutions provide both pastoral and academic support – but institutions are not immune from issues of recruitment similarly faced by the NHS, and academic staff do not feel equipped to appropriately support students in a pastoral capacity. All of this has created an unenviable situation in which students report delayed access to support from their university (or a lack of support entirely), and universities point to the pressure they experience trying to respond to rising demand for services. Services struggling with high demand can risk the most vulnerable students, such as care-experienced and estranged students, missing out on support. And universities may feel ill-equipped to support these students, particularly when their needs may be more complex or severe (few universities, for example, have specialist trauma therapists).

Emotional support and belonging

Quite apart from formal mental health treatment for diagnosable conditions, care experienced and estranged students may have particular psychological needs to be met if they are to thrive in higher education. It is common to hear stories about their struggle to fit in, and feel comfortable, understood and wanted, in what can be a novel and sometimes alienating environment. This interacts with the issues we raised above. Having less money – or feeling like you have less money – than your peers has obvious consequences for how included you feel. Living and distant from

the university community clearly increases the risk of isolation. Very many care experienced and estranged students, in addition to their familial situation, have other minority characteristics that contribute to a sense of difference from the mainstream including ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability.

Again, the survey data is somewhat more complicated than the standard narratives. Before applying, in the Unite Applicant Index, care experienced prospective students are almost exactly as anxious about fitting in: 51% worry about it, compared to 50% of the general population (and a bit lower – 43% – for those estranged).⁴¹ Now, that reflects a fairly high base rate – half of all students worry about fitting in. But it could also be because they are more likely to hold their peers at a bit of a distance. 55% of care experienced applicants say they have little interest in the social side of university, compared to 34% of estranged and 28% overall. It should not be surprising then, that HEPI finds higher rates of loneliness: 39% of care experienced students and 40% of estranged students say they feel lonely most or all of the time, where it is 25% in the rest of the student population.⁴² Another academic survey found that 40% of care experienced students feel ‘different’ from their peers.⁴³

Care experienced and estranged students seem to face certain particular concerns about stigma. Around half of care experienced applicants (47%) and a third (33%) estranged say they feel ashamed. Similar proportions – 49% of care experienced and 40% of estranged – admit to feeling rejected by others.⁴⁴

Confidence

A related issue is confidence. With many care experienced and estranged students feeling ill at ease, and often suffering from weaker academic preparation, it is unsurprising that many are unsure whether they are capable and doubt their ability to cope. As noted above, care experienced and estranged students are more likely to worry that they will not be able to keep up with their peers.

Perhaps surprisingly, given the resilience typically needed for care experienced students to even reach higher education, they report being more easily discouraged. 52% of care experienced students say that if they do badly at something, they do not like to try again (the corresponding figure is around a third for estranged students and the wider population).⁴⁵

The transition from local authority care to university can throw up a number of logistical challenges and breaks in support

The transition to university, and the independence it brings, is part of the challenge of becoming a student for many young people. It is, for many, their first experience of the strains and pressures of adulthood. Tending to be older – around half of care experienced and estranged students are over the age of 25, compared to a quarter of all students⁴⁶ – this will be less of an issue for some care experienced and estranged students, who would be expected to be more mature and independent. Yet for those who are getting their first taste of doing things on their own, this can be particularly tricky. One survey found that over a quarter of care experienced students arrived at university alone, which can heighten a sense of isolation and estrangement.⁴⁷

There are a number of logistical and practical challenges in moving away from local authority care. Care leavers are entitled to continued financial support from their council. From the age of 18, they will also have a personal advisor who takes responsibility for supporting them, reviewing their 'pathway plan', which sets out their educational goals (as well as objectives for health, financial management and family relationships), and keeping track of them. This sort of support can be quite variable in its effectiveness. For those that move away from the local authority where they grew up, there can be practical issues with follow up. Across our research, we heard reports that local authorities have a tendency to pay less attention to care leavers that go onto higher education, assuming (understandably) that they need less help than young people who may be out of education and employment, or facing issues with the criminal justice system.

*"[My local authority] didn't really have official sort of guidance [for helping me apply to university]. I remember they had this booklet that was still a draft, of the support that they offer. And they haven't improved that now. The pre application [support] was not like... they didn't really know what they were saying. So **one social worker would say one thing, another would say another.**" Student*

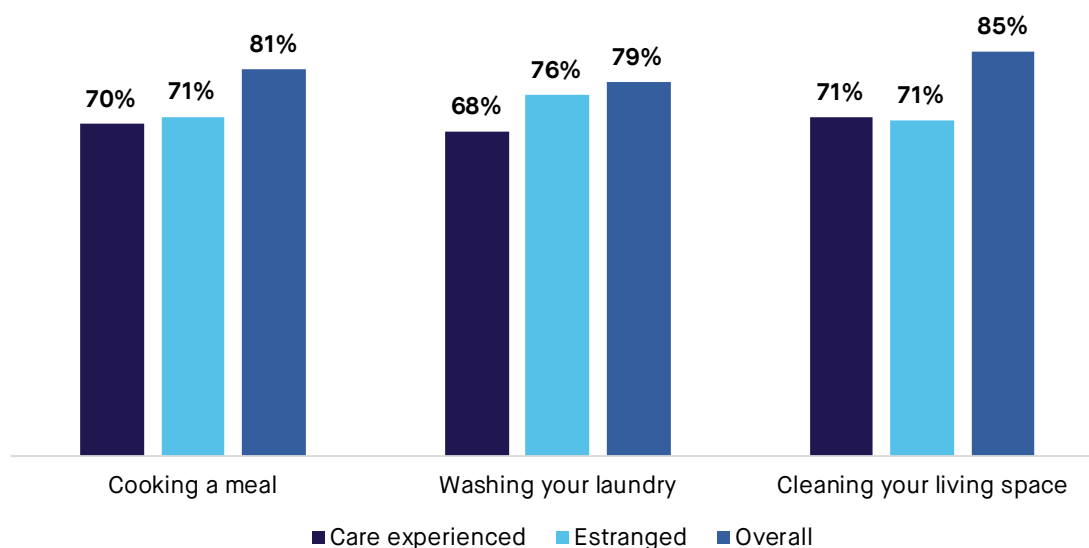
*"But when I was actually at university [the local authority was] sort of overbearing, if anything, which is maybe the opposite of probably what most people have had. **I did have social workers and PAs change too many times, but that's just sort of the nature of it.** But they'd want to be seeing me every six to eight weeks, even though I'm like, 21 years of age at this point. And yeah, I have no concerns or no issues or anything, and said, can we just stop? This is too much, especially because they wanted me to come back to London every time. So, yeah, I found it quite frustrating." Student*

*"I was in foster care for the ages of five till eight, but because I came out of the system before my 14th birthday, I didn't class as a care leaver, therefore I don't get any local authority support. **It feels like there's a phrase where you sort of fall off the care cliff.** I feel like that's kind of what happened to me, and my care experience just isn't acknowledged unless I say, oh, hi, I'm care experienced." Student*

*"Let's be realistic here, I think a lot **of local authorities don't see students care leavers who are at university as a priority** because they have other caseloads that are much more vulnerable." Civil society interviewee*

Yet the survey evidence suggests that there are significant issues with 'life readiness' and confidence living independently for many care experienced and estranged students. In Unite's Applicant Index, 72% of care experienced students say they are confident about living independently – a similar proportion to the 69% in the general population, although estranged students were far lower at 54%.⁴⁸ Below the hood, though, they were less confident on a range of life skills. As Figure 9 shows, care experienced and estranged students are less likely to say they feel confident cooking, cleaning and doing laundry than other students.

Figure 9: Proportion of applicants who said they would be confident doing the following activities tomorrow



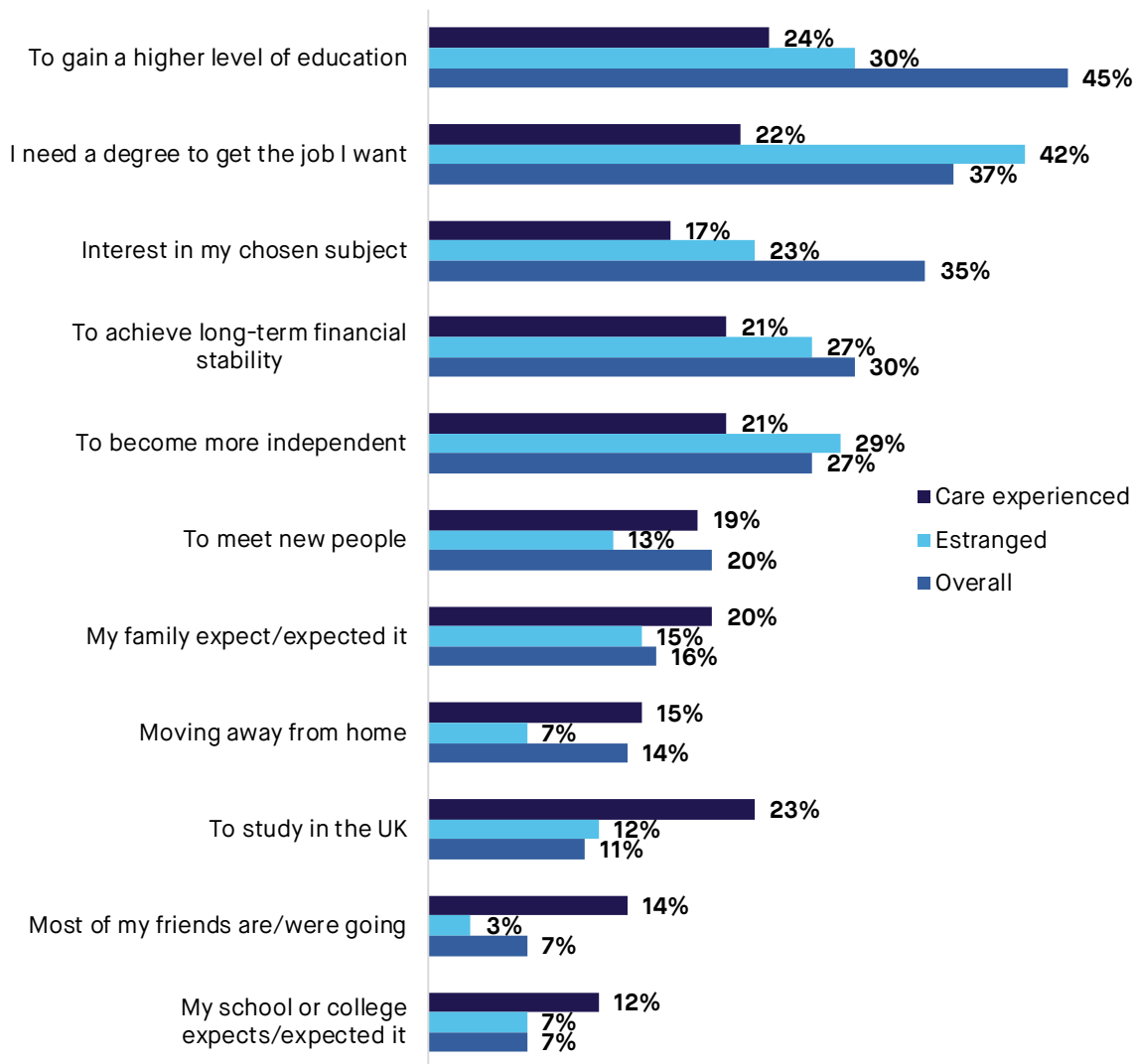
Source: Unite Applicant Index 2023-4; SMF analysis.

Overall, care experienced and estranged students are more ‘marginal’: their position within higher education is more likely to be on a knife edge

Putting this all together, one way of summing up the position of care experienced and estranged students is to describe them as more *marginal* than the rest of the student cohort. Their decision to enter higher education is more cautious, ambivalent and uncertain. Their attachment once within higher education is weaker, and they are at risk of being pushed to the periphery. The evidence we have presented in this chapter helps to explain these facts: weaker academic attainment, material challenges, psychological needs and tricky transitions all conspire to make care experienced and estranged students’ places more precarious.

Despite the impressive grit and determination displayed by many care experienced and estranged students, they may be more ambivalent about higher education than their peers. In the Unite Applicant Index, care experienced students display weaker intrinsic motivation – only 17% say they are going to university out of interest in their chosen subject, compared to 35% overall. Paradoxically, they also show lower instrumental motivation – 22% say they need a degree for the job they want, compared to 37% overall. Instead, they are more likely to offer reasons that suggest they are being carried by inertia: more of them say they are going to university because it is what their friends are doing or what their family expects. Now, this question was only asked in the 2024 edition of the survey, so should be treated with even greater caution because of small sample size, but it is suggestive and intriguing and warrants further study.

Figure 10: “What are your top motivations for going to university?”



Source: Unite Applicant Index 2024; SMF analysis.

The more tenuous commitment care experienced and estranged students have to university is reflected in the fact that they are more likely to consider alternatives. In the 2024 Applicant Index, only 4% of care experienced applicants did not consider working full-time, an apprenticeship or some other form of education, compared to 15% of estranged applicants and 25% overall. 46% of care experience applicants and 54% of estranged applicants say they think it is at least “somewhat likely” they will not end up going to university, compared to 32% of the total applicant pool.

To some extent, this may be a mix of confidence, expectations and aspirations. It requires improvements in career information, advice and guidance, approaches taken to care experienced students in schools and virtual schools, and greater effort for universities to make care experienced and estranged students feel welcomed, at home and like they can believe in themselves. It suggests that there are a number of

potential students that need a bit more of a push to get them over the hump into higher education and on a path towards their future goals.

Equally, these figures – combined with what we already know about school attainment and the weaker performance of care experienced and estranged students once they get to university – highlight the risks of pushing too hard. There exists, it seems, a meaningful proportion of students that are on the fence about going to university. For some this will be because they recognise that they do not yet have the necessary skills or because they would be better suited to alternatives. Forcing that group too hard risks wasting their time and energy on something that is not right for them. Indeed, these figures also raise questions about whether raising the continuation rate is necessarily a desirable target – if care experienced and estranged students are among the most marginal, it makes sense that many of them may want to try higher education and drop out if they learn it does not suit them. However, for others this ambivalence towards higher education compared to their peers may reflect a combination of low confidence, low aspirations, inadequate encouragement, and a lack of support in picking the right education pathway. Careers guidance is patchy across the school system⁴⁹, and interviewees highlighted the effect of disruption and school moves for care experienced pupils. Both care experienced and estranged pupils are less likely to have guardians and family talking to them about higher education and encouraging them to pursue these pathways. In interviews, there were concerns that those who were advising care experienced pupils such as social workers and foster parents may either not have adequate knowledge to inform them on the option of university, or may in some cases assume that university is out of their reach, or a risky choice at the expense of housing security, and so not actively encourage them to pursue it.

This is intended to be a counsel of realism, rather than despair, but it is *not* intended to write off care experienced and estranged people or to suggest that they should not be supported. As we have set out in this chapter there are significant barriers many care experienced and estranged students face that prevent them from succeeding at university. In the following chapter, we describe what is being done to remove those barriers, and offer some grounds for encouragement that well-targeted initiatives can make a meaningful difference.

CHAPTER THREE – WHAT SUPPORT EXISTS FOR CARE EXPERIENCED AND ESTRANGED STUDENTS AND HOW WELL DOES IT WORK?

Chapter summary

- We estimate that universities collectively spend approximately £10-15 million per year on dedicated help for care experienced students. Support commonly includes bespoke or priority access to existing bursaries, dedicated support staff, and forms of accommodation support.
- Increasingly, institutions offer support to all care experienced students, but some restrict eligibility to care leavers only, and help for estranged students is less common.
- Support is inconsistent between institutions, and perversely it is often the institutions that admit more care experienced and estranged students that have fewer resources.
- Of the support that does exist, evidence on the effectiveness of interventions is poor, often due to issues with data collection and accessibility. Overall, there is little confidence that existing resource is effectively distributed and spent across the sector.
- Furthermore, the system is largely run on goodwill from institutions, and support for care experienced and estranged students is discretionary in nature. The risk of such support being cut back in the face of funding constraints across the sector is concerning.

Having outlined the shape of the challenge facing care experienced and estranged students in the previous chapter, we now move on to examine what is being done to help them meet it. In this chapter, we provide an overview of the sorts of activities universities are undertaking, their scale, what we know about their effectiveness, and the issues that must be addressed to improve outcomes.

There is a remarkable amount of support for care experienced students – at least on paper

In our research, we went through the website for each UK university, as well as Propel, the online university guide for care leavers, to collect and compare the different forms of support on offer for care leavers. On the face of it, there is a lot. Figure 11 shows the number of institutions offering differing forms of support. Note that these are likely to be an undercount, as some universities may provide forms of support without having advertised them explicitly.

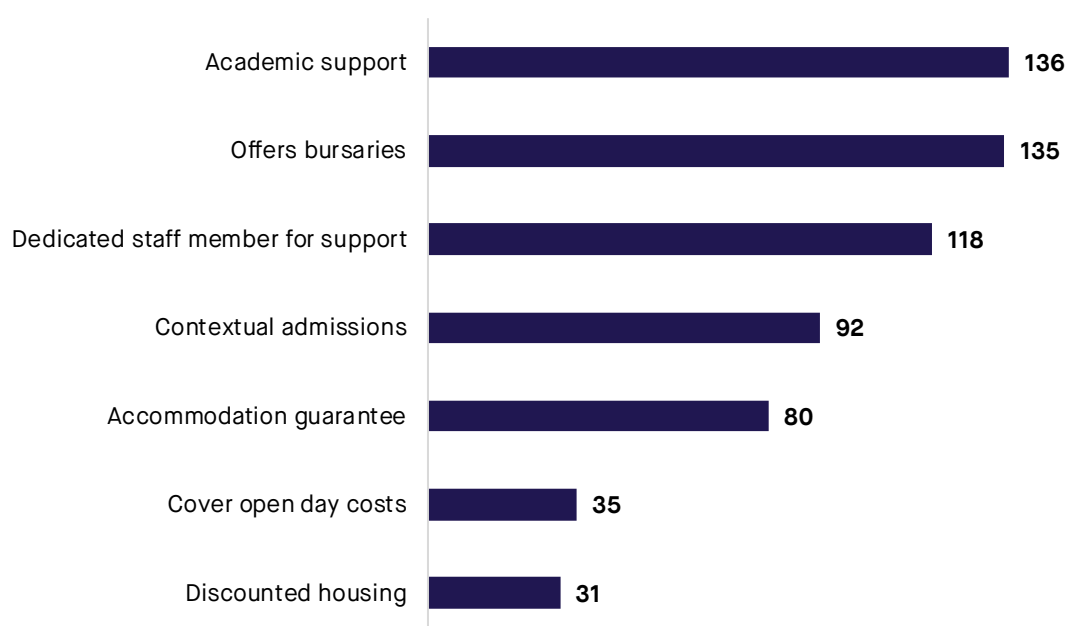
Some things are near enough universal. Basically every university we looked at claimed to offer specialised academic support. More impressively, almost all provide

financial support in the form of bursaries. These vary in terms of their generosity, but £1,000 is the standard amount: around half the universities that disclosed the size of their bursaries offered that much. It is generally regarded as expected practice to have a dedicated staff member who acts as a point of contact, and the vast majority of universities say they can provide that too.

Contextual admissions – taking an applicant’s circumstances into account when considering their application, and sometimes lowering the bar in terms of the grades needed to be accepted – is also widespread for care leavers. We found it in almost two-thirds of the institutions we reviewed. Guaranteed places in student accommodation are also fairly common, publicised by over half of institutions.

Financial support most typically takes the form of direct cash bursaries, though a significant minority of institutions offer discounted accommodation, and others offer help with the cost of attending open days.

Figure 11: Number of UK institutions offering each form of support for care leavers



Source: University websites, Propel; SMF analysis.

Since bursaries are the main financial commitment that universities make, we can use them to produce a rough estimate for university spending on care experienced students. Multiplying the size of bursary offered by each institution by the number of care experienced students studying there, using numbers from freedom of information requests made by Civitas⁵⁰, implies that £9.2 million a year is spent on bursaries. However, this excludes institutions that do not publish the size of their bursaries. If we assume they all offer bursaries of £1,000, that raises the total spend to £16.7 million.

Now, that assumes that every student takes up their bursary. In reality, we have heard that take up rates can be as little as a half. On the other hand, it does not

account for non-bursary costs, such as employing dedicated staff members and offering discounts on accommodation.

All of this means that our estimate is highly imprecise, and can be used only to offer an order of magnitude on the resources expended. However, we can offer a best guess that **around £10-15 million a year is spent by universities on dedicated help for care experienced students.**

Yet the support is inconsistent, and institutions with more care experienced students have fewer resources

Unfortunately, there is often a gap between what universities offer in theory, and what care experienced students receive in practice. We heard and read repeatedly that support for care experienced students can be inconsistent, and fail to live up to expectations.

For example, as Figure 11 shows, most universities say they provide a dedicated named contact for care experienced students. Yet what this practically means can vary widely. Some students have genuine available personalised support. Others may have to share their contact with dozens of other students. Others still just get access to a contact email or phone number which may or may not be manned when they need it.

That reflects a more general pattern – there are significant differences between institutions in terms of the caseload their staff have to deal with, how proactive they are, and how well trained and experienced they are.

There are also significant issues with student engagement and take-up of support. We heard from students who were unaware of their entitlements, only realised that they could get money or help partway through the year, and in some cases only found out once a crisis had ensued.

*“I wasn't aware of any support at all, which was really a big challenge for me. When I arrived at [institution], being a completely new student with no idea what I was doing. I wasn't [accessing] any support at all, and that led to me pretty much having a really rough first year, and it ended with me having to actually transfer because I just couldn't find any support no matter how hard I tried. **So it was really challenging for me, especially to provide any help with accommodation and just being a care experienced student in general is a nightmare, because there was no signposting, and that just seemed to be like a really general experience that I've now learned seems to be common.**” Student*

We would presume that better resourced and trained staff would be more effective and exhaustive in their efforts to engage students. Yet one institution we spoke to, highly regarded for its offer to care experienced students, admitted that only half of eligible students were actually receiving this support. In part, this is a data issue: while the introduction of a flag for care experienced students on UCAS applications seems to have improved things, institutions still seem to struggle to identify and track students that are eligible for support.

*“We can send hundreds of emails out and offer financial support and things like that, but some will still not ever get back to us or take up that support. Even though we have 160 care experienced students at any one time, and about 250 estranged students, at least, at any one time, I’d say only about **40% of those students would actually take up that support.**” Higher education representative*

Difference is not necessarily a bad thing, in an area where best practice is still emerging and needs can vary. We believe there are benefits to institutions innovating and experimenting with different approaches to support. Competitive dynamics have their place too, with universities seeing what their peers are doing and being driven to up their games. The Propel website is a valuable resource, allowing care experienced students to compare universities in terms of their approach to care experienced students. We certainly heard of students that chose their universities on the basis of the size of bursary on offer or other forms of support.

“I got an offer from everywhere I applied, and probably the best out of those was [University A], but [University B] has a super generous care leavers bursary, which was really obviously nice to have, and also the Unite Foundation Scholarship is only available at [University B].” Student

Yet if the variation is too wide, there is a risk that care experienced and estranged applicants are choosing institutions for the wrong reasons. If their decision is influenced too much by how much housing and financial support is on offer, they may deprioritise other educational or cultural factors that mean their preferred institution is not the right fit for them. They may feel unable to attend their preferred university because the economics don’t work. In HEPI’s student survey, 38% of care experienced students and 36% of estranged students have considered withdrawing from their course, compared to 25% of all students.⁵¹ One common reason they give is that they have chosen the wrong institution. Fiona Ellison, Director of the Unite Foundation, reported that “Anecdotally, we hear from students that what they think their university is going to provide isn’t always what is available or accessible, a likely reason many consider leaving”.⁵²

The issue is made worse by the fact that differences in provision track differences in resources rather than need. It is an over-generalisation to say that rich universities with fewer care experienced students can afford to treat them much more generously, whereas poorer universities that accept more care experienced students have to spread their resources more thinly – but it is an over-generalisation with more than a grain of truth.

*“It obviously isn’t [fair]. [High-tariff provider] congratulates itself that it has this amazing bursary scheme for its disadvantaged students. You know, there are literally 10 of them, and, yeah, **they give them the earth because they can afford to.** [...] On the other hand, you have institutions that basically let in a load disadvantaged students, then don't do anything [to support] them, and then expect to be congratulated because they've let them in” Policymaker, on distribution of resource across the HE sector*

Let us examine a few illustrative examples. The University of Sheffield offers a substantial bursary, worth up to £10,000 overall, but is third from bottom in Civitas’

ranking of institutions by the share of care leavers in their student population.⁵³ The University of York is widely regarded as one of the best institutions in terms of its support for care leavers – to the point that it was used as a case study in the MacAlister review – yet it sits in 96th place on Civitas’ league table. By contrast, the University of East London, which has proportionately more care experienced students than any other, has the standard £1,000 bursary.

The chart below shows how the average number of care experienced students in an institution varies by the generosity over its bursaries for care experienced students. It shows that institutions with bursaries up to £2,000 a year tend to have more care experienced students than those with larger scholarship funds.

Figure 12: Average size of bursary by number of care leavers enrolled in institution



Source: University websites; Propel; Civitas; SMF analysis.

Some programs have been demonstrated to make a significant difference, but the overall effectiveness of support remains unclear

Despite the significant amounts of money and effort that go into supporting care experienced students, it is difficult to say with any confidence how much of it makes a meaningful difference. In fairness, this is an inherently tricky area to evaluate – any individual institution will only have a relatively small number of care experienced students, making it hard to generate sufficient samples for robust statistical analysis. There is a clear need for the sector to develop a consistent mode of quantitative measurement to enable aggregation and sector level learnings; the Higher Education Access Tracker (HEAT) is predominantly used by member institutions to track young people through outreach activities into HE. It has the functionality to also record named student progression from entry through to completion, recording the bursary or ‘intervention’ take up and monitor potential impact.

Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO), the ‘What Works centre’ for universities, noted in their 2021 evidence review that there are no

robust studies that allow us to estimate the causal effect of interventions to support experienced students in higher education.⁵⁴ They also bemoaned the lack of consistent definitions and data linkage to help researchers. In total, they found at that time only one UK-based randomised controlled trial, which focused on 7-11-year-olds, and found no positive effect of gifting them books.

However, TASO did find a number of studies offering encouraging correlational evidence suggestive of positive impact – in terms of increasing access to HE, and student experience once at university. The majority of these interventions were pre-entry. For example, TASO highlight mentoring and counselling schemes like West Yorkshire Go Higher, a partnership between regional universities and colleges, which trains personal advisers and offers information to foster parents and local authority staff. Virtual schools – a group of education and social care professionals within a local authority that are given responsibility for monitoring and supporting children in care through their education – also have some positive evidence of effectiveness. The evidence base was weaker still when it comes to information, advice and guidance, though qualitative evidence suggests that people report finding it useful.

One scheme targeted at students once they reach university, and with sufficient scale to be evaluated, is the Unite Foundation scholarship.ⁱ The scholarship covers accommodation and bills for up to three years, including holiday periods, as well as offering rapid response pastoral support in conjunction with university and accommodation provider partners. To date, the Foundation has partnered with over 30 universities and supported over 800 students through their studies. In 2021/22, over 500 estranged and care leaver students had passed through the programme, which allowed the HE data company Jisc to assess its impact.⁵⁵ Unite Foundation scholarships appeared to have a remarkable effect on first year drop out rates, with the same proportion of recipients (87%) progressing to second year as non-care leaver students, considerably more than the overall average of 76% among care leavers. That level of success was not quite sustained throughout the full university journey: 71% of Unite Foundation scholars completed their degree within three years, compared to 77% of non care leavers – but this remains significantly higher than the 62% figure for care leavers. However the Unite Foundation scholars that reached graduation did remarkably well in their degrees: 78% achieved a first or 2:1 classification – just below the 81% of non care leavers that hit that mark, and well clear of the 71% of care leaver graduates that got a ‘good’ degree. Students in our focus group also spoke positively about the impact of the scheme:

*“If there was **one thing that would make everything better** [for care experienced and estranged students], it’s basically money. [...] Removing that financial pressure in whatever form you like, like bursaries or free accommodation – **like the Unite scholarship** – just alleviates a lot of that.”*
Student

ⁱ A note of transparency that Unite Students, which funds the Unite Foundation, sponsored this report. The Unite Foundation is an independent charity registered in England and Scotland. The Jisc report referenced was an independent analytical study of quantitative data from HESA.

To some extent, those raw numbers above reflect the fact that Unite scholarship students in the sample were more likely to be at Russell Group universities. However, the data was controlled for known factors of prior attainment, gender and Russell Group attendance, finding that these were not driving components. Whilst Unite Foundation scholarship students did better than their care leaver peers in any setting, it was male scholars at universities outside the selective Russell Group that travelled the greatest distance. The evidence of the Unite Foundation scholarships should give us encouragement, then, that targeted support for care experienced students can help them achieve better outcomes at university. Yet across our interviews we heard scepticism that resources are being optimally spent, partly due to difficulty establishing ‘evidenced best practice’ for interventions covering small numbers of students.

*“I think the sector has difficulty with that language [of best practice], because it describes best practice as having the most inputs, whereas actually, **what the sector needs to get better at, and knows it needs to get better, is understanding its best outcomes and its best outputs.**” Civil society*

*“It is not impossible, not just on care experienced [students], **that nothing we’ve done in the last 20 years [on widening access] has actually made any meaningful difference.** [...] It is not enough to just encourage more people to go [to university], you’ve actually got to improve the attainment of those people.” Policymaker*

Concerns over effectiveness of spending are not confined to initiatives for care experienced and estranged students. The above quote illustrates a concern we heard more widely in interviews – that funding for widening access and participation across the sector is not having the desired impact. This partly reflects concerns over the evidence base, or institutions not using available evidence when selecting initiatives for their setting. This concern is shared by the Office for Students (OfS), the regulator for higher education in England. In a speech made in 2022, its Director for Fair Access and Participation, John Blake, said: “For 20 years or more of widening participation work, we have nowhere near 20 years’ worth of evidence about what works. We can’t share what works, and we can’t make it work better, if we don’t actually know what does work!”⁵⁶

There are also more fundamental worries about how funding is distributed across the sector. The main source of external earmarked funding for university widening participation work comes from the Student Premium, distributed by the Office for Students to providers. The OfS distributes approximately £300 million each year to the sector for student access and success work. £41 million is spent on the disabled students’ premium, £20 million on Uni Connect, and the remaining £240 million forms the Student Premium funding streams.⁵⁷ Providers are allocated funding based on the proportion of students they admit who are deemed ‘high risk’ of withdrawing, for which the OfS draws on age, entry tariff and POLAR quintiles.⁵⁸ Interviewees had two fundamental concerns about the effectiveness of these funding streams: the criteria, and the distribution.

Interviewees queried whether the criteria for the funding (how they deem a student ‘high risk’) was appropriate. One interviewee went as far as to say that “**the student**

premium is distributed for entirely nuts reasons. It is based on something that was decided some years ago. It's mad. We need to change that." These concerns largely amount to a view that existing schemes are not targeting the correct 'high risk' students, and that subsequent evidence would lead us to prioritise other characteristics, such as care experience. Relatedly, the second concern was that, partly due to how wide the criteria is, the funding is spread so thinly across the sector that it risks having minimal impact at an institution or student level. Of the 338 providers that received funding for the 2024-25 year, the average award was £831,000 and the median was £135,000.⁵⁹ A few hundred million to support student success sounds like a lot, but for most institutions, represents a minuscule amount of their overall budget. The risk is that this money is not spent intentionally and with purpose, and not sufficient for those providers that have a high proportion of disadvantaged and resource-intensive students. And, because higher education providers are autonomous institutions, they do not have to report how they spend this funding, beyond confirming that it is used for widening access and participation activities.

This has encouraged efforts to develop something closer to an agreed 'playbook' for support available for care experienced students, with minimum expected standards and identified consistent practice shared between institutions. The most prominent is coordinated by the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL), a national membership charity of educational institutions and civil society organisations. In 2021, NNECL launched its Quality Mark, an award universities and colleges can apply for to certify the actions they have taken to support care experienced and estranged students. In 2024, in response to the closure of the national estrangement charity Standalone, NNECL committed to extending the Quality Mark to include estranged students. The application process involves a self-assessment by the institution of its offer in a range of areas. That is followed by a review from NNECL, which compares material submitted against national practice. The Quality Mark also includes the development of an Action Plan for continual improvement. Once awarded the Quality Mark, institutions hold it for three years, with a light touch midway review.

Among the specific things institutions are evaluated (Satisfactory/Enhanced/Exceptional) on in their applications are the following⁶⁰:

- Institutional culture and leadership, including senior responsibility and strategic oversight and consistency in terminology and definitions
- Monitoring and evaluation
- Access/transition support for students, including named liaison managers, pre-entry advice and guidance and effective promotion of academic and pastoral support
- Inclusive admissions processes
- Effective and timely financial, mental health and accommodation support
- Strategies to support progression, continuation, academic challenges care experienced and estranged students face
- Collaboration with other institutions

The Quality Mark suffers from similar evidentiary challenges to other initiatives to support care experienced and estranged students. It is perhaps most accurate to say that institutions are evaluated on interventions that represent our ‘best guess’ at what works to help care experienced and estranged students, as opposed to evidence-based best practice. Similarly, institutions do not have to evidence improved outcomes for the students benefiting from the above interventions. The central challenge in this area is the lack of accessible data preventing such assessments and lack of consistent measurement mechanisms.

At the time of writing, 38 institutions have been awarded the NNECL Quality Mark, of which 21 are universities, and the rest colleges.⁶¹ Yet in our interviews, we heard that there has been a significant slowdown in progress following the recommendation in the MacAlister review that the government should introduce a “new kitemark scheme for higher education”. MacAlister called for the government to build on the existing scheme, “working in partnership with NNECL”.⁶² Yet the perception it created was that the NNECL Quality Mark would be superseded has encouraged institutions to adopt a ‘wait-and-see approach’, and thus undermined NNECL’s efforts.

*“It was hugely damaging to the NNECL quality mark. Institutions wanting to go ahead [with the NNECL quality mark] paused, because they needed to know what the outcome of that project was. They weren’t going to have the resource or money to do two quality marks. **It was hugely, hugely damaging on something that could have been so positive and powerful.**” Civil society*

The system largely runs on goodwill – which makes it precarious

As we have outlined in this chapter, we have been broadly impressed by the effort and resources that universities put into supporting care experienced students, even if we are less confident that the resources are fairly allocated and efficiently spent. However, the other thing that has struck us is the extent to which the system relies on goodwill. Perhaps that should not be surprising: educational institutions should have a strong sense of mission and social justice. Yet the highly discretionary nature of support for care experienced students raises some worries. If it seen as a ‘nice to have’, an extra, that makes it less secure, particularly in tough times.

It is apparent that tough times are on the horizon, if not already here, for many universities. Between the declining real terms value of tuition fee income, and a squeeze on international student numbers, the financial difficulties facing many institutions are well established. According to the Office for Students, 40% of providers are expected to be in deficit in 2023/24.⁶³ It is reported that 67 institutions are carrying out redundancy and restructuring programmes.⁶⁴ In a constrained financial environment, it would be surprising if all forms of spending were not under the microscope.

On the other hand, many people we spoke too were more sanguine. Support for care experienced students is effectively a rounding error in university budgets, 1/3000th of the sector’s overall £44 billion turnover.⁶⁵ Would it really be worth cutting back, especially when universities have made such public commitments to care experienced students?

“The number of care experienced students in any university is tiny. [...] I'm not sure I'm worried in the sense of retrenchment [of support], because I think there are enough people in universities who now get this agenda, who understand it, and therefore will keep their own institutions honest and focused and so on. [And] actually a lot of the best practice here costs no money. It's about mindset and processes, rather than about throwing money at the problem.” Academic

In particular, universities are required to submit Access and Participation Plans (APPs) to the OfS in order to charge tuition fees above the basic fee limit of £6,165. Most APPs make commitments to improve data on and understanding of the needs of care leavers. In 2018/19, the OfS reported 49 specific targets relating to care leavers, with 33 on access.⁶⁶ That all makes it hard to walk back spending on care experienced students too far – though it does not rule out erosion of support at the edges. A clear expectation set by OfS in relation to explicit and consistent mode of data monitoring across the sector to be captured in APP, as recommended, will serve to protect and widen support.

Students at the margins – particularly estranged students – risk falling between the cracks

In Chapter One we discussed the variation in terminology and definitions. This turns out to be critical when it comes to determining eligibility for support, and causes a range of problems for those that fall on the wrong side of a particular line. The majority of institutions use the broad definition of ‘care experience’ to determine eligibility for support, opening it up to anybody who has been within the care system at any point. That fits with the UCAS definition, which ought to have been flagged prior to attendance. However, some prioritise care leavers for support, using the narrower definition of eligible children – in care on or after their 16th birthday, and looked after for at least 13 weeks by a local authority after the age of 14.

Care leavers are entitled to specific support from their local authority, in the shape of a £2,000 bursary and help from their personal adviser – though in practice the level and effectiveness of support varies from local authority to local authority. *Care experienced* students are less likely to get such support, even before we get to their entitlements from their institution.

The situation is even murkier for estranged students. As we have already seen, they are harder to track statistically because they are not generally captured in existing data. The definition of estrangement is trickier and more essentially subjective. If someone interacts with the care system, in principle that ought to be verifiable using evidence from the local authority in question. Estrangement is a much more subjective phenomenon, and depends more on self-reporting. There is also the issue that estrangement may occur as or after the students enrolls at university, or indeed reconciliations, temporary or otherwise, can occur. For many estranged students the verification of their status comes from applying for student finance as an independent student (i.e. where parental income is not assessed). Thanks to the work of the now closed charity Standalone, awareness of this route to support has grown significantly over recent years, though is by no means universal. There

remains a risk for that awareness to now decline. However, estrangement status can shift over months and years, and issues of shifting circumstance over time are difficult to overcome. Better data collection and sharing could improve issues surrounding identifying the needs of identified estranged students and sharing practice in terms of access and support.

There is a recognition within the sector that estranged students face many similar challenges to care leavers and care experienced students. For example, NNECL's Quality Mark guidance encourages institutions to include estranged students in their activities.⁶⁷ Yet the definitional and identification challenges make it harder to serve them. In our focus group, for example, there was frustration among students at the intrusiveness of institutions' efforts to validate claims of estrangement. Participants in our focus group inclined towards a self-identification approach, where students would be taken at their word. Yet with some support packages worth thousands of pounds, having no verification process at all is understandably not palatable to institutions.

The upshot is that students on the margins, particularly estranged students, risk missing out on the support they need. Whilst, currently, there will be a need for institutions to validate claims of estrangement in circumstances where they are seeking financial support, institutions should seek to reduce the burden of disclosure and evidence on the student where possible.

CHAPTER FOUR – RECOMMENDATIONS

Over the course of this report, we have set out the challenge facing society if it is to deliver on its obligations to care experienced and estranged people, and make sure that they have the same opportunity to benefit from and succeed in higher education as their peers. In this chapter, we move on to developing some recommendations for how we can do things better.

To reiterate, care leavers are considerably less likely to go to university than other people, and they share a common set of challenges with care experienced and estranged students. That includes lower school attainment that makes it harder for them to access and thrive in HE; material disadvantages in terms of money and accommodation; psychological needs, both mental health and identity/belonging; and difficulty with the transition into independent adulthood, especially if support is disrupted.

We have found a substantial amount of activity from universities to support care experienced students, amounting to somewhere in the order of £15 million a year. Yet this support is inconsistent across institutions, and less affluent institutions with more care experienced students have to spread resource more thinly. It is unclear how effective this spending is, and it remains precarious for as long as it is at institutions' discretion. Moreover, those on the margins of the system, particularly estranged students, risk being left out.

In this chapter, we present our recommendations. These are divided into four categories: **funding, data, access, and responsibility**. We have ordered recommendations by priority. We believe all to be valuable, but there are some that must come first to enable others. For example, funding comes first, as we believe the most fundamental issue is resourcing support within education institutions: at a structural level, the biggest issue is the fact that the system runs on goodwill, and some institutions can afford more goodwill than others. That is why we recommend that the government step in and guarantee a basic level of funding that follows each student to ensure institutions have the money and incentive to support them adequately.

Some recommendations are also targeted at different groups. Whilst we acknowledge that many of the barriers faced by care leavers, care experienced and estranged students are similar, some interventions are only feasible for specific groups. This is usually due to challenges identifying the latter two groups accurately and not necessarily because they would not benefit from the intervention. We hope that if recommendations regarding data are implemented, then in the future it will be possible to extend some of the interventions currently targeted, for example, at care leavers, to other groups.

There are recommendations for various different bodies and organisations, including government, local authorities, and educational institutions themselves. This reflects the fact that the barriers faced by care experienced and estranged students are extensive and present in all areas of their lives, and many overlap with both the social care and education system. The breadth of recommendations and responsibilities we

suggest for different bodies represents a recognition that it is everyone’s job to support these students – it will not be possible to make meaningful gains on access and participation without a joined-up approach across government, the sector and wider society.

Table 1: Summary of recommendations

	Recommendations
Funding	Introduce a care experienced and estranged Student Premium scheme, offering institutions grant funding for each enrolled student.
	Reform Student Finance England to reflect the needs of care experienced and estranged students, including providing additional non-repayable grants, and extending student finance to cover the full 52 weeks of the year.
Data	Support the development of evidence-led good practice, including by i) expanding the relevant data published by HESA in England including an estrangement flag; ii) requiring institutions to include care experience/estrangement in their APPs and ultimately to work towards the NNECL Quality Mark to access funding; iii) commissioning long term tracking of outcomes for institutions participating in schemes like the Quality Mark.
Access	Introduce ring-fenced funding for tutoring of care experienced pupils in years 1 to 11.
	Prioritise care experienced pupils for a minimum level of personalised careers support in schools.
	High tariff universities, supported by the Department for Education, should develop a targeted support programme for the top-performing care leavers at GCSE level, supporting them in years 12 and 13 in the lead up to university application season.
	Introduce a Guaranteed Offer Scheme for care experienced and estranged pupils.
Responsibility	Encourage universities to sign up to the Care Leaver Covenant, ahead of consideration of giving them corporate parenting responsibilities.
	Standardise local authority support and extend support through to graduation for those care leavers that enrol aged 25 or under.

Funding

The government should provide grant funding to universities and colleges for each enrolled care experienced and estranged student

The biggest structural issue we have diagnosed in our research relates to funding of support for care experienced and estranged students. We have described its insecure, discretionary nature and the inequity of less affluent universities with more care experienced students being able to offer them less. We have also highlighted concerns that, more broadly, the £300 million pot for widening participation funding distributed by the OfS is not being utilised effectively. We see a simpler and more efficient alternative: institutions should have direct funding for each enrolled care experienced and estranged student to ensure that they have the necessary resources guaranteed.

This is not a new idea – a similar principle operates within the school system in the form of the pupil premium, which provides schools with additional funding for each disadvantaged student they enrol. Primary schools receive £1,455 per pupil eligible for free school meals, while secondary schools receive £1,035. The rate is higher for looked after children, who attract a premium of £2,530.⁶⁸

We propose that this should be set at a level of £1,000 a year per care experienced or estranged student to universities and FE colleges. This scheme would have two benefits, in common with the school pupil premium programme. First, it would reflect the additional costs institutions incur in effectively serving care experienced and estranged students and ensure that less affluent institutions have the resources they need to support them. Second, it would provide a clear directive with supporting financial incentive, for institutions to attract, and retain care experienced and estranged students. This would be particularly valuable given the headwinds facing these populations of university applicants described above.

As noted above, there are currently 12,360 care experienced students at English universities.⁶⁹ That implies the total current cost of the scheme for HE would be just over £12 million for care experienced students. If the MacAlister review target of doubling attendance rates were achieved, that would double the cost to £25 million. Provisional data suggests that in 2022/23 there were 8,603 estranged students⁷⁰ in English universities. The additional cost would be under £9 million, bring the total cost of this scheme to £21 million at current attendance rates.⁷¹ We have focused in this report on universities, but as we said in Chapter One, this does not reflect any judgement on our part about the value of higher education relative to further education. On the contrary, we are well aware of the tendency of policy to overlook colleges, and would not like this scheme to add to that problem. Therefore we would argue for the additional funding to be extended to care experienced students in colleges on the same terms.

As in compulsory schooling, it is key that funding should follow the student, and thus be proportionate to the number of care experienced students each institution takes on. However, we have suggested that the funding should go to the institution rather than to the student directly reflecting their need to resource evidence-based

services and interventions. The reason is that we want to use the funding to foster a culture of innovation and experimentation in support for these students, as well as incentivising institutions to follow evidenced practice.

Given the different contexts, it is appropriate that these grants are funded separately for FE and HE. We propose:

- The £12 million for the Care Experienced and estranged Student Premium in HE should form part of the OfS Student Premium funding stream, mirroring the Disabled Student Premium. This funding should come from the pot of £240 million currently distributed amongst providers.
- Funding for the Care Experienced and estranged Student Premium in FE should come in the form of grant funding from the Department for Education, and should be a new spending commitment (in addition to current levels of funding).

Widening opportunity is one of the government's core missions, and Labour has committed to supporting the aspiration of every person who meets the requirements and wants to go to university. The government has also signalled ambitions specifically to support young people who have been in care. However, as we've explored, the progress that has been made in regard to widening participation in HE is at risk. To a significant extent, that progress has been driven by structural, and temporary, changes, namely the resulting grade inflation that predicted grades had during the pandemic. Meanwhile, the university sector is in financial trouble. It is likely that we will be seeing fewer disadvantaged students (including care experienced and estranged students) getting the grades to get into university, and fewer institutions able to fork out lots of discretionary cash on widening access and participation schemes from their own budgets. That will put greater pressure on the funding earmarked to support universities to broaden opportunity, and makes it imperative to improve its distribution and transparency.

For now, it makes most sense to fund the higher education Care Experienced and estranged Student Premium through the existing student premium funding stream, held by the OfS. It provides a great opportunity to explore different and more efficient ways of funding widening participation work, which will be critical in the face of the above headwinds to even stay still, let alone progress forwards, with widening access. It would follow the student, mitigating the risk that institutions doing the true heavy lifting in widening access have the least resource to hand. We envision this acting as a pilot or proof of concept; in the long-term, the formula used to distribute the wider pot should be reviewed. One of the benefits of this type of scheme is that it should be relatively easy to evaluate, and compare whether it is more efficient than how widening access and participation funds are currently distributed. If that is the case, then restructuring the whole balance to be distributed via simultaneous Student Premium type schemes, adding other particular 'at risk' or 'resource intensive' student groups, could be a more efficient and fair way of distributing funding across the sector. It is likely that at some point the pot will need to increase in size – but it will be a pot that is more targeted, efficiently spent, and hopefully, an effective contributor to the government's broader mission of opportunity.

Recommendation one – introducing a Care Experienced and Estranged Student Premium scheme.

To guaranteed adequate levels of funding to support care experienced and estranged students, there should be a Care Experienced and estranged Student Pupil Premium scheme in HE and FE. This should be set at £1,000 per pupil and follow the student.

For HE, the Office for Students should source this funding from their current student premium streams. A review of the current effectiveness of those streams should follow.

For FE, this funding should be provided by the Department for Education, in recognition of the importance of supporting alternative pathways for care experienced and estranged students, the higher number of care experienced pupils in FE, and the existing financial difficulties FE faces.

Eligible groups: Care experienced, defined as those who have had experience with the care system at any point in their childhood, identified through local authority data; Estranged, identified through Student Finance.

While our focus in this report is on care experienced and estranged students, we could envisage the pupil premium principle being expanded to other forms of disadvantage. The wider trends we have discussed in this report – of financial pressure on universities, and pressure to restrict university places – suggest that the government may have to provide more direct funding to institutions, and that access for disadvantaged groups may become harder. Linking that direct funding to admission of disadvantaged students is one way to lean against the wind when it comes to those risks.

Reforms to the student finance system in England should recognise the distinctive financial needs of care experienced and estranged students

We have outlined in this report that care experienced and estranged students have distinctive needs. Each person's own experience and identity will be different, and there is by no means a 'universal' experience for all who fall under these categories. However, there are a number of fundamental needs that all students need to have met in order to study, which care experienced or estranged students find harder to meet. These most basic needs include housing, food, and warmth, and by extension the financial ability to obtain these securely. In particular, structures which assume that students have support of family – financial support to contribute to maintenance costs, and practical support to provide a family home to which students can return outside of term time – contribute to this disadvantage.

It is widely documented that the current level of maintenance support for students is insufficient to cover the cost of studying at university. One report by the Higher Education Policy Institute calculated the gap between the maximum maintenance

support available and what students need to cover their core costs is approximately £8,400 per year.⁷² The implicit assumption is that parents or guardians will make up the difference between government funding and the cost of living.

Many care experienced students and all estranged students (by definition) will not have access to this additional parental support. Currently, those who are care experienced, or can demonstrate that they are an independent student on the basis of estrangement, will receive the maximum maintenance loan to reflect the lack of parental contribution. However, given that care experienced and estranged students are also the most marginal, and most unsure about pursuing higher education, and likely to be more debt-averse, it seems perverse that they should have to take on additional debt for circumstances outside of their own control. Given that the government has already signalled⁷³ that maintenance support for students is an area that they would like to review, we would recommend prioritising reducing the debt burden for care experienced and estranged students. At a minimum, care experienced and estranged students should be provided a non-repayable grant reflecting an average parental contribution on top of which they can apply for a maintenance loan.

In addition, student finance payments should cover 52 weeks of the year for care experienced and estranged students. Currently, if a student is studying a course that lasts longer than 30 weeks and three days they are able to apply for a Long Course Loan as well as their maintenance loan.⁷⁴ However, most courses are less than 30 weeks and therefore maintenance loans are calculated and paid to only cover part of the year that the student is studying. Again, the implicit assumption is that, when not receiving maintenance funding, students return to their family homes. For care experienced and estranged students the issues of finding and financing accommodation during the summer months are well documented. Extending student finance as a non-repayable grant for these groups for the full 52 weeks of the year is necessary to ensure that they have access to safe and consistent accommodation throughout the year.

Recommendation two – reform student finance to reflect the needs of care experienced and estranged students

Student Finance England should:

- Provide a non-repayable grant to care experienced and estranged students reflecting an average parental contribution on top of which they can apply for a maintenance loan.
- Extend student finance pro rata as a non repayable grant for these groups to bridge the gap between study weeks and full 52 weeks of the year.

Eligible groups: Care experienced, defined as those who have had experience with the care system at any point in their childhood, identified through local authority data; Estranged, identified through Student Finance.

Data

Additional grant funding to institutions should come with requirements to follow evidence-led good practice, and support to identify that practice

Standardising funding of support for care experienced students addresses the problem of its precarity and unfair distribution, but it does not address the problem of its ineffective use. We therefore believe that accessing the funding should come with some requirements to make it more likely that it will be spent well. The difficulty, as we have outlined above, is that the evidence base on interventions is limited, and the small numbers of students at any given institution make it hard to conduct rigorous evaluations. Moreover, those small numbers create risks of reading too much into essentially random variation – for example, any league table (such as the one proposed by Civitas) is likely to be either extremely volatile year to year, or aggregate so many years as to be out of date before its published.

Nonetheless, there are things that the government could do to encourage sector-wide evaluation, and underpin a culture of sharing evidenced practice, benchmarking and continuous improvement.

In order to access funding, providers should include care experience and estrangement in their Access and Participation Plans, and ultimately to be working towards the NNECL Quality Mark

In the first instance, in order to access the specific funding from the Care Experienced and Estranged Student Premium that we have proposed, institutions should be expected to make commitments to improve access for those groups as part of their Access and Participation Plans (APPs) with the Office for Students. As noted above, in 2018/19, 49 institutions had targets with respect to care leavers. Increasing that number would not just be a public declaration to the sector regulator of a commitment to improve, but would also push institutions to gather and publish data to check their progress. APPs have an official status that makes them a good starting point for accountability, though they tend to be relatively high level.

In the longer term, it would be desirable to expand participation in the NNECL Quality Mark. We are under no misapprehensions that it is perfect, and it will be important to have stronger evidence of its effectiveness. It is largely reliant on self-assessment, though NNECL work with providers and do some external qualitative evaluation. But it has the great virtue of already being up and running, and there can be no doubt that it is a good faith effort to compare activities and push institutions to develop. To improve the scheme, the OfS should fund TASO, the HE ‘what works’ centre, to undertake an immediate, sector-level evaluation of the components of the NNECL quality mark. Where appropriate TASO should work with other analytical bodies throughout this exercise. This baseline can then be built upon by subsequent work by NNECL membership, supported by TASO, incorporating a consistent quantitative data collection into the quality mark.

The government should end the uncertainty that has held the Quality Mark back, by clarifying that it will not be developing a kitemark, and instead endorsing the NNECL

version. With the proposed fund that we have suggested, the government has another lever to support NNECL, and at the same time improve the chances that the additional funding it is providing is being utilised well. For that reason, we would favour it being an eventual condition of receiving the care experienced and estranged student grant funding, in addition to APP data capture, that institutions must hold or be working towards the NNECL Quality Mark.

TASO should be given responsibility for helping institutions spend effectively on support, and there should also be additional aggregate level monitoring of progress

In the previous section, we suggested that an analogy for the proposed care experienced students fund is the Pupil Premium in the schools. The Pupil Premium was not just good in itself, but it also contributed to the establishment of the Education Endowment Fund (EEF), the ‘what works’ centre for schools, since schools were encouraged to consult with the EEF on how to spend their Pupil Premium money. That, we believe, has gone some way to ensuring that schools operate in an evidence-based manner.

There is a similar opportunity with support for care experienced and estranged HE students. TASO could play an analogous role to EEF. It should be tasked with helping institutions to make the best use of their investments in care experienced and estranged students. TASO could act as a curator of evidence-based initiatives, conduct evidence reviews (beyond what it has already done), and provide resources. It should also be engaged in evaluation – from conducting independent trials of promising initiatives to supporting institutions in making sense of their own data including through consistent sector frameworks like HEAT and NNECL membership.

TASO’s current operating budget is £1.5 million.⁷⁵ Even a £500,000 investment from government or higher education institutions, to allow it to monitor, evaluate and drive improvement in support for care experienced and estranged students, could be transformative.

All this merely relates to small scale initiatives, and efforts to improve tactics and process. However, this should be complemented with aggregate level evaluation of how effectively schemes such as the NNECL Quality Mark are working. To that end, the government should fund quantitative research tracking outcomes for care experienced and estranged students, and seeing how they are affected by participation in different schemes – as Jisc conducted to evaluate the Unite Foundation scholarship. This research would help us understand the effect (if any) of the NNECL Quality Mark on student participation and outcomes. It would also measure progress over time.

Data on care experienced and estranged students should be more easily available

While independent monitoring and evaluation offer a critical check on institutions, institutions also need to understand their own performance, and refine their activities. Yet at present this is made difficult by their inability to access robust data. In particular, the Higher Education Statistics Agency does not currently track estranged students in England, though it does in Scotland and Wales, and so there would be value in inserting a ‘flag’ in their dataset against estranged students

(defined by student finance application), so as to measure progress and outcomes for that group. There are also significant issues with the data that HESA already collects on care experienced students, since universities, academics and, perhaps more significantly, charities, currently have to pay to access this. Making this free would not just make it more accessible, but would also send a clear signal that providers and professionals are expected to track their performance on care experienced and estranged students in a national context

That all relates to data at an aggregate level. Perhaps more tricky is access to data at an individual level, which raises challenges around privacy and appropriate data sharing. Yet there is reason to think that we do not yet have the balance right. We have outlined the way that low awareness and take up of support remains a chronic challenge, with as much as half of available help going unused. That would be easier if institutions could confidently identify and target those in need. At present, 1 in 11 higher education providers do not know the care leaver status of most of their students.⁷⁶

For the students' part, in our reading, and in our focus group, we encountered consistent frustration at having to identify themselves as care experienced or estranged, and explain their background and details repeatedly.

*"I don't mind explaining my situation. I'm not ashamed of it, but it's a bit disappointing when time and time again, you're being told that the university will take care of you, and they don't even know what your situation is. **They don't know what estrangement is, they don't know what foster care is.**"*
Student

*"At each transition, the **burden is on the young persons to self declare.** I think that the unintended consequence of it for young people is the repeated need for them to declare their set of circumstances, which can be re-traumatising as well as boring, as well as time consuming, as well as unnecessary and stigmatising." Civil society interviewee*

Indeed, for the most part students either expect this information to be shared already, or would prefer it to be. In the Unite Applicant Index, 43% of care leavers said that they believed schools regularly share information about care experience status with universities. Around half thought that they would share safeguarding information (48%), information about mental health conditions (50%) and information about disabilities and reasonable adjustments that may be necessary (48%). Asked whether they would be willing to let their schools share some of this information with their university, only 9% of care experienced applicants and 16% of estranged students said they would refuse consent.⁷⁷ There is, it would seem, greater scope and appetite for data sharing than is currently in place. Beneficial to both estranged and care experienced students would be a semi-automated mode of data transfer between UCAS and Student Finance respectively, to universities. UCAS already collects and shares data on free school meal recipients (also waiving UCAS fees for these young people), and this could be extended to care experienced and estrangement status. An opt-out rather than opt-in approach would secure the important aspect of data-subject choice. It would also allow institutions to proactively offer support to those eligible. Systematic transfer of factual status

information adds value to university provision, removing their need to search for relevant students or deploy application systems.

Recommendation three - supporting the development of evidence-led good practice

Support the development of evidence-led good practice, including by

- expanding the relevant data published by HESA in England including an estrangement flag
- requiring institutions to include care experience/estrangement in their APPs and ultimately to work towards the NNECL Quality Mark to access funding
- commissioning long term tracking of outcomes for institutions participating in schemes like the Quality Mark.

Access

Access efforts should prioritise school attainment and addressing under representation of number of care experienced students at selective universities

Doubling overall university participation is inadvisable without improving school attainment – to that end, tutoring, investment in virtual schools, and careers guidance can help

It is natural for policy discussion of HE outcomes for care experienced and estranged students to gravitate towards the headline number of students in university. It is the most natural measure of success. The MacAlister review's objective of securing a quality education for care experienced people is broader than the target of doubling the proportion of care leavers attending university, and particularly high tariff universities, by 2026 – but that target is where attention is naturally drawn. Similarly, Scotland's perceived success in supporting care experienced students is often evidenced by reference to the tripling in the numbers going into HE (albeit from a lower base than England).

We understand the value of these targets for focusing minds and keeping government, sector and society accountable for achieving genuine change. At the same time, though, it is critical that targets are achievable, and that we avoid perverse consequences that could result from pursuing them too aggressively. In Chapter Two we described how almost every expert we spoke to believes that school attainment is the biggest barrier to HE access for care experienced and estranged people, and presented some of the statistics on school performance that backs up their view. We also presented the evidence that care experienced students are often among the most marginal – least certain as to why they are going to university, and that university is for them.

Moreover, there are structural headwinds coming. The return to a more ‘normal’ examination grading system, following the grade inflation that accompanied the pandemic is likely to put downward pressure on care experienced students’ school attainment. The proportion of looked after children that passed English and Maths GCSE fell from 27% in 2020/21, to 19% in 2022/23.⁷⁸ Demographic trends – with the number of English 18-year-olds forecast to increase by around 200,000 over the course of the 2020s, peaking in 2030 – will also heighten competition for places.⁷⁹ And with growing pressure on the ‘unit of resource’ (budget per student) in universities, calls to reintroduce student number controls – which would likely hit marginal students liked the care experienced particularly hard – are likely to intensify.⁸⁰

For those reasons, we are sceptical of the MacAlister review’s suggested target of doubling the number of care leavers in higher education, at least for the foreseeable future (the original goal was to be achieved by 2026, which seems frankly inconceivable). Such an increase would likely result in students being admitted that are underprepared and not suited to or ready for higher education, resulting in frustration, disappointment, lost months and years and unnecessary expense.

That does not mean that we are satisfied with the current level of access to HE for care experienced and estranged students. It is beyond the scope of this report to go too far into schools and compulsory education, but the single most effective thing policymakers could do to ensure more care experienced and estranged people get into and succeed at university would be to improve their outcomes at Level 2 and Level 3 (GCSE/A Level equivalent).

Improving resourcing and accountability of virtual schools could help with that. There is encouraging evidence that they improve attendance, though effectiveness and capacity varies significantly – not least because of stretched local authority budgets – and there is significant scope to spread good practice.⁸¹

*“There are some real challenges, because of the interplay between local authorities, statutory duty, what we’re supposed to do, and funding. If local authorities are so stretched, they can’t deliver on those statutory duties as well, or they do in a very variable way. **It creates a lot of unfairness in the system and tension and confusion.**” Local authority representative*

There may also be scope for targeted tutoring. There is reasonably good evidence that small group tuition is an effective way of improving academic outcomes.⁸² The National Tutoring Programme, which was introduced in order to help disadvantaged children catch up during the pandemic, was ended earlier this year – though there have been widespread calls for the new government to extend it.⁸³ While some have argued that the learning gain from the programme would carry sufficient economic benefit to bring the £660 million programme back in its entirety, a more affordable step would be to introduce ring-fenced funding aimed at care experienced pupils.⁸⁴

Recommendation four – tutoring for care experienced pupils.

The Department for Education should introduce ring-fenced funding aimed at care experienced pupils covering years 1 to 11, based on the successful former National Tutoring Programme.

Eligible groups: Care experienced, defined as those who have had experience with the care system at any point in their childhood, identified through local authority data

The fact that grades account for most of the participation gap between care experienced and non care experienced people suggests that the role of aspiration and ambition is somewhat overstated. But these things matter too, and the encouraging evidence on mentoring schemes and educational initiatives like Go Higher West Yorkshire suggests they can make a difference. The strongest lever that the government has here is careers advice and guidance.

As we at the Social Market Foundation have found in previous research, access to quality careers support has improved in recent years, but remains rather patchy.⁸⁵ What is worse is that it is socially patterned, with less advantaged students less likely to have higher education opportunities promoted to them. Indeed, in our focus group with care experienced and estranged students, there was substantial divergence in terms of the how informed and supported students felt through the application process:

“For me, it was really quite a challenge, because I really didn't know anything, and I hadn't been able to go to any open days at all, so I ended up just picking up basically off what I could see from the online websites.”
Student

A 2022 survey by UCAS found that only 35% of care experienced students said they had received help from a careers adviser in applying to higher education.⁸⁶

We have called for a minimum entitlement of three one-to-one sessions for each school leaver.⁸⁷ One way of improving support would be to give care experienced and estranged young people priority access to this entitlement.

We are aware that young people in care have access to personal advisers and develop pathway plans that set out their educational objectives. However, there is growing recognition of the value of specialised professional careers guidance, which is a different thing. Given its importance in general, we believe it should be a priority for care experienced young people and tailored to the specificities of their experience and pathways.

Recommendation five – careers support for care experienced pupils.

The Department for Education should follow our previous recommendation to ensure every school leaver receives a minimum level of personalised careers support by offering an entitlement to three one-to-one sessions. Care experienced young people should be prioritised in this offering, by being given greater priority during roll-out and by receiving this for their final two years of schooling (as opposed to only in the final year).

Eligible groups: Care experienced, defined as those who have had experience with the care system at any point in their childhood, identified through local authority data

A targeted approach could help achieve the MacAlister review’s goal of doubling the number of care experienced students at selective universities

The MacAlister review’s education mission is not just to double the proportion of care leavers attending university, but “particularly high tariff universities”. This second target seems to us more achievable, although again, getting there by 2026 will be highly challenging. 90 care leavers entered high tariff universities in 2021/22, according to the Department for Education.⁸⁸ That represented a significant increase on the 50 that entered two years earlier, suggesting that pandemic exam grades may have boosted access to high tariff universities. As exam grades go back to ‘normal’, there may be downward pressure on the number of care leavers at the most selective universities. However, at least some of the gains seem to be down to the expansion of high tariff universities, which is less likely to be reversed: while the number of care experienced students at high tariff rose 80% between 2020 and 2022, their share of the student body rose just 51%.

We have already set out proposals for addressing equity in funding, and we would expect our Care Experienced and Estranged Student Premium to increase the resources available to less wealthy lower tariff institutions that tend to have less resource but admit more of these students (addressed in recommendation one). However, there is also a role for higher tariff institutions to play here. 14% of all non-care leaver school leaver enter a higher tariff institution – for care leavers, this is just 0.13%. There was a sense across interviews that higher tariff institutions are not sufficiently ‘pulling their weight’ when it comes to widening access and participation, especially for this group. To achieve parity in the distribution of care leavers across the sector, higher tariff institutions would have to approximately double the proportion they admit. Focusing on parity of access across the sector, alongside greater equity in funding, would not only open up opportunities for care leavers to attend high tariff institutions but would also place onus on providers that are typically better resourced to expand their widening access work.

The target is stretching, to say the least. However, the numbers involved are small, which makes it feasible with a highly focused strategic campaign. What came out in interviews was that there is significant goodwill in the sector, and the low access

rates to high tariff institutions is not for lack of enthusiastic staff working on widening access initiatives. Many high tariff institutions have started work in this area, including covering costs for care leavers to attend open days that may otherwise be prohibitive. However, these institutions report that they struggle to find and access the most underrepresented groups of students, 'hard to reach' groups, in time to make a difference to whether they apply to and are admitted to university.

This issue can be solved. The Department for Education knows, through virtual schools, which care leavers across the country performed highest in their GCSE examinations. A strategic intervention in which high tariff universities give greater support to these pupils could help give them the best possible chance of getting into university.

The Department for Education should act as a convener, bringing together higher tariff institutions and representative bodies to develop a national support programme. They would develop a cohesive programme which individual institutions would then deliver for these high-achieving care leavers (perhaps in collaboration with existing charities where appropriate), to support them throughout years 12 and 13 in the lead up to university application season. This support could take different forms, and perhaps include a guaranteed offer. This could, look something like existing encouraging schemes like West Yorkshire Go Higher or the First Star program highlighted by the MacAlister review, which offers academic and life skills support, with monthly sessions at a university campus. However, it would be targeted at the highest achieving GCSE students specifically to address critical under-representation. The Advancing Access scheme shows that this kind of collaboration by high-tariff institutions is possible, although admittedly rare. The scheme provides resources, training and support to teachers and advisors to help them support students to progress into Russell Group universities, and was developed collaboratively by the 24 member institutions.

It is important to note that, due to the additional barriers these pupils face in schooling and examinations, this list would inevitably exclude some who could excel in higher education but have received lower grades due to educational disruption. This list would only be able to identify the highest performing at GCSE level, and that is not necessarily the same as pupils with the highest potential. With any policy intervention, we have to work with the data that we have, even if it is imperfect. However, the insight of the virtual school is ideally placed here; where Local Authorities have identified a pupil who has significant potential to enter high tariff higher education but has received lower GCSE grades on account of educational disruption, they should be able to include these pupils within the scheme. Furthermore, this list would help high tariff institutions better target their widening access and participation work, and set a precedent for the Department for Education facilitating contact between 'hard to reach' disadvantaged students and institutions with the resources to support them.

Some might question the prioritisation of the highest performing care experienced students – who might be expected to have less need of help – and object to the apparent elitism of focusing on the most selective universities. We share some of

those egalitarian qualms. But it is an argument that carries an echo of the objection to local authorities putting resources into supporting care leaver students, when it could be prioritising those with more acute need in the criminal justice system or at risk of unemployment. The fact that some care experienced young people may be in need of greater support does not mean we should neglect those who have the potential to do better than their current pathways suggest – we should be striving for equitable access at all levels. If this were the only thing the government did to support care experienced students, that would reflect misplaced priorities. The fact that care experienced and estranged students are disproportionately more likely to drop out of university and less likely to achieve a first or a 2:1 shows that getting their foot in the door is just the first step. Without also addressing issues in the support available for students when they attend university, particularly housing and financial support, we may be setting them up to fail. This initiative therefore must be considered in the context of the wider reforms we propose, especially the changes to funding, which ought to rebalance resources to less prestigious and well-funded institutions, and improve the consistency and quality of support available.

In any case, we should not deny the fact that attending high tariff universities does in general confer certain benefits that are not available to other students – whether that results from the greater level of resources, the benefits of having more academically able peers, or the signalling value of a specific institution on one’s CV. Recent analysis by TASO also found that attending a more selective institution results in greater employment rates and higher earnings for disadvantaged students, even when controlling for demographics and prior attainment.⁸⁹

Our interviews also revealed that low aspirations are key barriers to access for this group – they tend to have lower confidence in their own abilities, and those around them may not be encouraging them to reach their full potential. The issue of confidence is present more broadly throughout underrepresented groups in higher education. Previous research has found that more disadvantaged students tend to apply to less selective courses and institutions compared to more advantaged students with the same attainment levels (called ‘undermatching’). The risks of undermatching are significant – students who undermatch are less likely to graduate with a ‘good’ degree (first or 2:1), and tend to have lower salaries following graduation.⁹⁰ Our focus groups with students highlighted that this is even more critical for care leavers, who not only face low confidence but also may undermatch because they have chosen a course or institution with lower selectivity but higher levels of support. As well as providing practical advice on applications and preparing for university, we envision that this scheme will work to raise confidence for participants. The focus should be on ensuring that they feel that university (and more selective institutions) is achievable for them, and providing them with the practical support they need for their potential to be realised.

The MacAlister review’s focus on high tariff universities was, therefore, not arbitrary. The risk of students undermatching is present across disadvantaged groups, but there is reason to believe that this may be more common for care experienced students. It is also clear that this group may have the most to gain from being better supported by more selective institutions. While clearly not on the scale as the other

challenges facing care experienced students, getting more of them into “elite” institutions, with the potential improvements in life chances that entails, is still worthwhile.

Recommendation six – targeted support for high-achieving care experienced pupils.

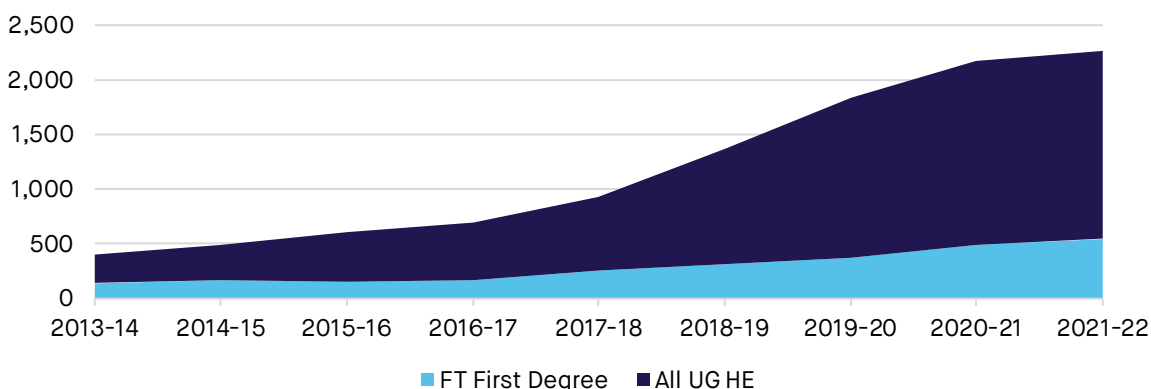
The Department for Education should identify the top care experienced pupils at GCSE level each year. They should convene high tariff institutions and representative bodies to develop a comprehensive support programme for these students over the year and a half leading up to university applications, providing tailored support including for example mentoring, open days and orientation events (where all expenses are provided). Institutions should consider also providing a guaranteed offer to study on an appropriate course.

Eligible groups: Care experienced, defined as those who have had experience with the care system at any point in their childhood, identified through local authority data

Alongside targeted outreach for high-performing students, a Guaranteed Access scheme would help increase access for all, whilst maintaining admissions standards

In 2019 Scottish universities announced a new Guaranteed Access scheme, where care experienced applicants would be guaranteed an offer to study if they met the minimum advertised entry requirements. This reform was part of a wider suite of offers for care experienced students in Scotland, where, as one interviewee described, “Scotland [is] always ahead of England in relation to children in care and education”. The number of care experienced young people entering university has risen significantly in Scotland – for full-time undergraduate degree students this represents an increase of almost 300% since 2013, and an increase of almost 50% since the access scheme was introduced (Figure 13).

Figure 13: Number of Scottish-domiciled care experienced entrants 2013-14 – 2021-22, by full time first degree and all undergraduate HE intake



Source: Scottish Funding Council Report on Widening Access 2021-22

Of course, the context is different in Scotland, where universities are publicly funded. This scheme was likely partly so successful because undergraduate places are limited in Scotland in a way that they are not in England, where institutions are admitting more and more students each year. In Scotland this means that competition is very high – the overall entry rate is 29%, compared to 37% in England.⁹¹ Giving care experienced students priority in this admissions context makes a lot of sense, whilst ensuring that they are academically prepared for the course by maintaining admissions criteria.

However, our interviews and reading made it clear to us that these types of schemes can work successfully for reasons beyond reducing competition in admissions – by raising aspirations and by increasing stability. As discussed previously in the report, care experienced young people tend to be more ‘marginal’ – they are not as certain about attending university and are more likely to have considered other options. In our focus groups we also heard routinely that, because of experiences of instability and disruption throughout their life, they will often make decisions based on what will give them the most security. These decisions may not always be in their best interest academically – for example, deciding to apply for a lower tariff provider because there is a greater chance of them being accepted, even if they have the grades for a higher tariff provider. Or, indeed, not applying at all if they are unsure if they will be admitted. Essentially, the risk of applying and not knowing if you’d been admitted until shortly before term starts is too much of an unknown for many young people who need stability.

*“Because of adverse childhood experiences for some young people, particularly if they’re looking to pursue [higher education] by themselves, **the risks associated with not getting in limits your ambition.** So that aspect of [grades] being published, of all I need to do is get [the grades] they say, and I’m definitely guaranteed a place is a pull. It acts as a pull and it made a massive difference to their intake.” Civil society interviewee*

Therefore, the introduction of a Guaranteed Access scheme would be a welcome step in increasing aspiration and access for care experienced young people in England. We envision that it would increase applications (and therefore acceptances) for all care experienced students, at all levels of attainment and to all different types of providers, but would likely also help towards increasing access at high tariff providers specifically and particularly if subjective interview criteria were waived. And because of the condition of meeting the minimum entry requirements, it avoids concerns related to contextual offers about the academic readiness of the applicant.

Getting institutions to implement such a policy may be somewhat trickier in England than in Scotland, where the system is more centralised. However, the fact that the majority of institutions already offer contextual admissions, as we saw in the previous chapter, suggests the goodwill exists to support more inclusive offers. Universities UK, as the representative body for vice-chancellors, should be responsible for bringing together institutions, working with other mission groups such as the Russell Group, MillionPlus and University Alliance, and other sector bodies such as UCAS and the OfS, to broker such an arrangement.

Recommendation seven – a Guaranteed Offer Scheme for care experienced and estranged pupils.

Universities in England should implement a Guaranteed Offer Scheme, where care experienced or verified estranged students are guaranteed an offer to study at any institution if they meet the minimum entry requirements advertised.

Eligible groups: Care experienced, defined as those who have had experience with the care system at any point in their childhood, identified through local authority data; Estranged, identified through Student Finance.

Responsibility

Directing universities to sign up to the Care Leaver Covenant, to solidify their sense of responsibility toward care experienced students

Beyond the direct policy levers we have discussed in this chapter, there is something to be said for more fundamental legal changes that assign universities a clearer sense of accountability towards their care experienced and estranged students. Perhaps the most eye catching proposal in the MacAlister review was the call for Britain to be the first country in the world to recognise care experience as a protected characteristic, by amending the Equality Act.

That has generated a certain amount of controversy among care experienced people. Some see it as a necessary move to reflect the discrimination and lack of understanding of hardships that care experienced people endure. Others are wary of such a legalistic approach, and in particular the need to disclose their status (though it is usually argued that any such disclosure should be voluntary). The previous government's response to the MacAlister review expressed concerns that the move could inadvertently increase stigma.⁹²

*“Views on [care experienced becoming a protected characteristic] have been mixed from care experienced people in terms of how helpful it will be, **and there are fears that it would leave them more open to discrimination if they're identifying themselves.**” Academic*

Such a move would have two types of benefits. First, it would have symbolic or expressive value – highlighting society's commitment to prioritising those with experience in care, legally recognising their vulnerability and resolving to address the injustices they face. In a context following the MacAlister review where momentum seems to have stalled, such a move could reinvigorate the society-wide mission to do better. Second, such a change would feed into processes. It would encourage institutional bureaucracies to collect data on care experienced people along with other protected characteristics, and to better measure progress. It would make it more likely that care experience gets a 'seat at the table' when it comes to

discussions around questions of equality – for example, in impact assessments and the like.

Some institutions, laudably, have decided not to wait for government legislation, and have decided to act as though care experience is a protected characteristic, for example by including them in equality impact assessments. That may be for the best, because seeking to amend the Equality Act may open a can of worms that the government prefers to keep shut. However strong the case for care experience as a protected characteristic, launching the discussion will invite a number of other apparently worthy candidates – but bringing them all under the aegis of the Act risks adding to regulatory burdens that a government seeking to present itself as pro-business will want to avoid.

Fortunately, there is a less contentious intermediate step that the government can take more easily: designating universities as ‘corporate parents’ for care experienced and estranged young people. Indeed, that was the last government’s favoured approach: in its response to the MacAlister review, it proposed to prioritise extending corporate parenthood as “more impactful” than making care experience a protected characteristic.⁹³

The MacAlister review said that a wider range of institutions should take on corporate parenting responsibilities currently held by local authorities, to reflect the shared societal responsibility to care experienced people. That would mirror the approach taken in Scotland, where the Children and Young People Act 2014 named 126 organisations – including universities, colleges, health boards and police – as corporate parents. The duties of corporate parents to those they are responsible for are to:

- Be alert to matters that might adversely affect the wellbeing of their charges
- Assess their needs for services they provide
- Promote their interests
- Provide them with activities designed to promote their wellbeing
- Help them access relevant opportunities and services⁹⁴
- Take other actions to improve its functioning

In March 2024, the All-Party Parliamentary Group for care experienced children and young people produced the conclusions of an inquiry into corporate parenting. It set out the nature of the role of corporate parent, suggested frameworks of governance, identified principles that might be enshrined in law, and named specific institutions (including schools, further education and higher education institutions) that should come under the descriptor.⁹⁵

In practice, corporate parenthood responsibilities have encouraged Scottish universities to invest in a lot of the activities we have already discussed. The Scottish government’s most recent corporate parenting update, from 2021, outlines a number of university initiatives, which cover broadly familiar themes: financial assistance, accommodation support, guaranteed offers dedicated points of contact, pre-entry engagement and support with the transition to university, early move in dates and early access to support staff training and awareness raising for staff.⁹⁶ But it also

highlights efforts to make care experienced and estranged students feel more welcomed and at home, including celebrations like social media campaigns and care leavers' week events and establishing groups and associations.

Corporate parenting in Scotland has not created a new playbook or set of duties for institutions, but it has given them impetus to do what the most engaged and enthusiastic were doing anyway. That reflects the nature of the move – less radical than it might seem, merely confirming and endorsing the way that the most progressive institutions already saw themselves. The responses to the UK government's consultation question on corporate parenting seems to confirm the notion that this is just common sense: educational institutions were among the most common bodies proposed as corporate parents.⁹⁷

In that sense, it is representative of the broader direction of travel. There is already a lot of good work going on, but it is too often informal, discretionary, based on high mindedness and prosocial motivation. Those instincts should be kindled, not crowded out. But establishing a sense of moral obligation and responsibility, rather than charity, it would better reflect our societal commitment to care experienced and estranged young people, and reinforce the idea that this is not optional – securing them the best possible educational opportunities should be everybody's mission.

At the same time, even corporate parenthood is going to require some degree of consultation and discussion with institutions. As a more immediate step, we recommend that the government direct institutions to sign up to the existing Care Leaver Covenant. A recommendation of the government's 2016 strategy for supporting care leavers, the covenant is a voluntary pledge made by organisations, including many universities, to develop and publicise 'offers' that support care leavers, underpinning inclusion and widening participation. Its objectives are to ensure care leavers are prepared and helped to live independently; that they have access to employment, education and training; that they feel stable, safe and secure; that they receive health and emotional support; and that they can achieve financial stability.⁹⁸

A key offer for care experienced and estranged students that institutions could make as part of this could be ensuring that they have a rent guarantor scheme. As discussed throughout the report, housing is the largest non-academic barrier that these students face. As well as often struggling to afford housing costs, these students are also less likely to have access to someone who can act as a guarantor for them when signing rental contracts, which are commonly required in the private rental sector. Some universities already have guarantor schemes in place, where they act as a guarantor for students who cannot ask a family member or guardian. Making this common practice across the sector would have a positive impact on these groups of students, helping them to find secure accommodation close to their study location. Other organisations, such as Purpose-Built Student Accommodation providers, should also be encouraged to waive requirements for a guarantor for these groups.

The Department for Education should undertake a campaign to raise awareness and sign ups to the covenant. As well as institutions, this should include charities, funders, commercial suppliers, graduate employers and local authorities.

Recommendation eight – Direct Higher Education institutions to sign up to the Care Leaver Covenant, ahead of any consideration of corporate parenting of care experienced and estranged young people

Higher Education institutions should sign up to the Care Leaver Covenant whilst government takes forward consideration of higher education institutions as corporate parents of care experienced and estranged young people, formalising a role for them to support these students.

Eligible groups: Care experienced, defined as those who have had experience with the care system at any point in their childhood, identified through local authority data; Estranged, identified through Student Finance.

Support provided by local authorities should be expanded and standardised, to address the ‘postcode lottery’ and ‘cliff-edge’ drop off of support

Throughout this report it has been clear that issues of support level and consistency is not confined to the education sector, but is also a major issue for young people accessing local authority support. This is often due to confusion around whose responsibility it is to support different groups at different stages, leading to many who fall through the gaps and end up in a camp where no one takes responsibility, and support is lacking. Local authorities have statutory duties to support care leavers, which includes providing a personal advisor, creating a pathway plan, and supporting with housing and financial needs up until the age of 18. Some local authorities also have excellent initiatives to help support care leavers into and through higher education, such as supporting with term time rent costs. However, when local authority budgets are stretched we can see a disparity in the level of support offered. Care leavers we interviewed commonly reported difficulties knowing what they were entitled to and what their local authority offered. There was a sense that there was a ‘postcode lottery’ for local authority support, and that this was especially challenging when care leavers were moving into a different local authority for university.

The issue of financial and housing support ending at age 18 was also a common challenge, particularly in accessing higher education. As we’ve explored, care leavers are more likely to go into higher education later in life, and will likely need similar levels of support progressing into higher education as a care leaver applying straight out of compulsory schooling. This ‘cliff-edge’ drop off of support can be devastating for care leavers: a report in 2023 found that 1 in 10 care leavers were homeless or threatened with homelessness after the end of the local authority statutory duty at 18.⁹⁹ This is an issue that the government has acknowledged: the

Prime Minister recently promised that young care leavers would have a “guaranteed roof over their head” and “the security they deserve”.¹⁰⁰

There is clearly a need to both standardise local authority support for care leavers and for the age of eligibility to be extended. The Department for Education should undertake an immediate analytical review of outcomes for care leaver students by local offer, and then utilise this learning to develop a universal offer of support for local authorities to deliver to care leavers pursuing higher education, which should include housing and financial support. This offer should extend up to graduation as long as they enrolled before age 25.

Recommendation nine – standardise local authority support and extend up until graduation

The DfE should conduct an immediate analysis of HE outcomes by LA set in the context of Local Offers to assess any evidence of an effectiveness baseline

Based up on evidence identified, the Department for Education should then develop a universal offer of support that they expect all local authorities to deliver to care leavers pursuing higher education. This should include financial and housing support. The support should extend up until graduation for those who have enrolled before they turned 25.

Eligible groups: Care leavers, as defined under local authorities statutory duties.

ENDNOTES

¹ Josh MacAlister, 'The Independent Review of Children's Social Care: Final Report' (Department for Education, May 2022), https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230308122535mp_/https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-Final-report.pdf.

² APPG for Care-Experienced Children and Young People, 'Inquiry on extending corporate parenting responsibilities across the public sector: Final report', March 2024, <https://becomecharity.org.uk/content/uploads/2024/03/APPG-Corporate-Parenting-Inquiry-Final-Report.pdf>

³ Labour, 'Breaking down the Barriers to Opportunity', July 2023, <https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Mission-breaking-down-barriers.pdf>.

⁴ Fiona Duncan, 'The Promise' (Independent Care Review, February 2020), https://www.carereview.scot/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The-Promise_v7.pdf.

⁵ Cabinet Secretary for Education and Skills, 'Corporate Parenting', Scottish Government, accessed 30 August 2024, <https://www.gov.scot/policies/looked-after-children/corporate-parenting/>.

⁶ Dame Ruth Silver, 'A Blueprint for Fairness: The Final Report of the Commission on Widening Access' (Scottish Government, March 2016), <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/progress-report/2016/03/blueprint-fairness-final-report-commission-widening-access/documents/00496619-pdf/00496619-pdf/govscot%3Adocument/00496619.pdf>.

⁷ Who Cares? Scotland, Scottish Funding Council, and Universities Scotland, 'Scotland's Universities' Guaranteed Offer: A Guide for Care Experienced Students', July 2022, <https://www.whocarescotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Guaranteed-Offer-RM.pdf>.

⁸ Student Awards Agency Scotland, 'Support for Care Experienced Students', accessed 30 August 2024, <https://www.saas.gov.uk/full-time/support-for-care-experienced-students/bursary>.

⁹ Welsh Government, 'Basic Income Pilot for Care Leavers: Overview of the Scheme | GOV.WALES', 15 February 2023, <https://www.gov.wales/basic-income-pilot-care-leavers-overview-scheme>.

¹⁰ Ruth Mosalski, 'Wales Won't Keep Giving Care Leavers £1,600 a Month in Basic Income Trial', *Wales Online* (blog), 27 October 2023, <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/politics/wales-not-continue-paying-care-27990859>.

¹¹ Office for Students, 'Care Experienced Students', accessed 2 September 2024, <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/equality-of-opportunity/equality-of-opportunity-risk-register/student-characteristics/care-experienced-students/>; Office for Students, 'Consistency Needed: Care Experienced Students and Higher Education', Insight 8, 9 April 2021, <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/5919/insight-8-april-2021-finalforweb.pdf>.

¹² Office for Students, 'Consistency Needed: Care Experienced Students and Higher Education'.

¹³ MacAlister, 'The Independent Review of Children's Social Care: Final Report'.

¹⁴ Office for Students, 'Care Experienced Students'.

¹⁵ Office for Students, 'Consistency Needed: Care Experienced Students and Higher Education'.

-
- ¹⁶ Frank Young and Danniell Lilley, 'Breaking the Care Ceiling' (Civitas, September 2023), <https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/Breaking-the-care-ceiling.pdf>.
- ¹⁷ Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 'The Benefits of Higher Education Participation for Individuals and Society: key findings and reports', October 2013, <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7ba5fee5274a7318b9004a/bis-13-1268-benefits-of-higher-education-participation-the-quadrants.pdf>
- ¹⁸ John Simes, 'Widening Participation in Higher Education, Academic Year 2021/22', GOV.UK, 13 July 2023, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education>.
- ¹⁹ UCAS, 'Next Steps: What Is the Experience of Students from a Care Background in Education?', November 2022, <https://www.ucas.com/about-us/news-and-insights/ucas-reports/next-steps-what-experience-students-care-background-education-report>.
- ²⁰ Simes, 'Widening Participation in Higher Education, Academic Year 2021/22'.
- ²¹ Young and Lilley, 'Breaking the Care Ceiling'.
- ²² UCAS, 'Next Steps: What Is the Experience of Students from a Care Background in Education?'
- ²³ Office for Students, 'Access and Participation Data Dashboard' (Office for Students, 21 March 2023), Worldwide, <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/>.
- ²⁴ Office for Students, 'New data highlights equality gaps for estranged students', November 2020, <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/new-data-highlights-equality-gaps-for-estranged-students>
- ²⁵ Department for Education, 'Children's Social Care: Stable Homes, Built on Love Government Consultation Response', September 2023, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/650966a322a783001343e844/Children_s_Social_Care_Stable_Homes__Built_on_Love_consultation_response.pdf.
- ²⁶ Bree Waine, 'Outcomes for Children in Need, Including Children Looked after by Local Authorities in England, Reporting Year 2023', Explore education statistics, 18 April 2024, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england>.
- ²⁷ Elaine Drayton and Laura van der Erve, 'The Impact of Student Loan Minimum Eligibility Requirements' (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 27 April 2022), <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/impact-student-loan-minimum-eligibility-requirements>.
- ²⁸ Young and Lilley, 'Breaking the Care Ceiling'.
- ²⁹ Neil Harrison, 'Moving on up: Pathways of Care Leavers and Care-Experienced Students into and through Higher Education' (NNECL & University of the West of England, November 2017), <https://www2.uwe.ac.uk/faculties/CAHE/Documents/Research/MovingOnUp.pdf>.
- ³⁰ 'Applicant Index Report', Unite Students, 15 July 2024, <https://www.unitegroup.com/applicant-index-report>.
- ³¹ Because of the relatively small sample of care leaver applicants, we have pooled the two most recent years to ensure the inferences are more robust.
- ³² Jonathan Neves et al., 'Student Academic Experience Survey 2024', HEPI, 12 June 2024, <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/06/13/student-academic-experience-survey-2024/>.
- ³³ Jacqueline Stevenson et al., 'Positive Impact? What Factors Affect Access, Retention and Graduate Outcomes for University Students with a Background of Care or Family Estrangement?' (Sheffield Hallam University, February 2020).

-
- ³⁴ Katie Ellis and Claire Johnston, 'Resilience, Higher Education and Widening Participation: Generating Change for Care Experienced Students', *Higher Education* 87, no. 1 (1 January 2024): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-022-00985-8>.
- ³⁵ Zoe Baker, 'Facing the Cliff-Edge: Care-Experienced Graduates' Access to and Progression through Taught Postgraduate Study in the United Kingdom', *Higher Education*, 19 April 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-024-01219-9>.
- ³⁶ MacAlister, 'The Independent Review of Children's Social Care: Final Report'.
- ³⁷ 'Applicant Index Report'.
- ³⁸ Neves et al., 'Student Academic Experience Survey 2024'.
- ³⁹ UCAS, 'UCAS undergraduate end of cycle data resources 2023', <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-data-resources-2023>
- ⁴⁰ COSMO Study UK, "Briefing No. 1 – Mental and Physical health", November 2023, <https://cosmostudy.uk/publications/mental-and-physical-health>
- ⁴¹ 'Applicant Index Report'.
- ⁴² Neves et al., 'Student Academic Experience Survey 2024'.
- ⁴³ Ellis and Johnston, 'Resilience, Higher Education and Widening Participation: Generating Change for Care Experienced Students'.
- ⁴⁴ 'Applicant Index Report'.
- ⁴⁵ 'Applicant Index Report'.
- ⁴⁶ Neves et al., 'Student Academic Experience Survey 2024'.
- ⁴⁷ Ellis and Johnston, 'Resilience, Higher Education and Widening Participation: Generating Change for Care Experienced Students'.
- ⁴⁸ 'Applicant Index Report'.
- ⁴⁹ Social Market Foundation, 'Fulfilling its potential?', April 2022, <https://www.smf.co.uk/publications/fulfilling-its-potential/>
- ⁵⁰ Young and Lilley, 'Breaking the Care Ceiling'.
- ⁵¹ Neves et al., 'Student Academic Experience Survey 2024'.
- ⁵² Fiona Ellison, 'Breaking New Ground - Understanding Care-Experienced Students', *HEPI* (blog), 21 July 2023, <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2023/07/21/breaking-new-ground-understanding-care-experienced-students/>.
- ⁵³ 'Support for Care Experienced and Estranged Students', University of Sheffield, 13 August 2024, <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/access-sheffield/support-care-experienced-and-estranged-students>; Young and Lilley, 'Breaking the Care Ceiling'.
- ⁵⁴ Miriam Styrnol, Jelena Matic, and Susannah Hume, 'Supporting Access and Student Success for Learners with Experience of Children's Social Care' (TASO, January 2021), <https://cdn.taso.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Supporting-learners-with-experience-of-childrens-social-care-1.pdf>.
- ⁵⁵ Jisc data analysis, 'The Unite Foundation Scholarship Scheme. A Quantitative Impact Analysis on 10 Years of Accommodation Support for Estranged and Care Leaver Students.' (Jisc, June 2022), https://thisisusatuni.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Unite-Foundation-JiscAnalysis-Report-_Final.pdf.
- ⁵⁶ Office for Students, 'Next steps in access and participation', February 2022, <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/news-blog-and-events/press-and-media/next-steps-in-access-and->

participation/#:~:text=Everyone%20I%20have%20spoken%20to,actually%20know%20what%20does%20work!

⁵⁷ Office for Students, "Recurrent funding for 2024-25", July 2024, <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/qonpbqwr/recurrent-funding-for-2024-25.pdf>

⁵⁸ Office for Students, "Guide to funding 2023-24", July 2023, <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/c76f13e2-9add-4aa1-91fa-8dbb20d0b17c/guide-to-funding-2023-24.pdf>

⁵⁹ Office for Students, "Recurrent funding for 2024-25: Annex A", July 2024, <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/recurrent-funding-for-2024-25/>

⁶⁰ NNECL, 'Quality Mark Guidance: June 2021', June 2021, https://hubble-live-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/nnecl/file_asset/file/18/NNECL_Quality_Mark_Guidance_June_2021.pdf.

⁶¹ 'Quality Mark Holders', National Network for the Education of Care Leavers, accessed 12 September 2024, <https://www.nnecl.org/pages/222-quality-mark-awards>.

⁶² MacAlister, 'The Independent Review of Children's Social Care: Final Report'.

⁶³ Office for Students, 'Financial Sustainability of Higher Education Providers in England' (OfS, 16 May 2024), <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/media/ly1buqlj/financial-sustainability-report2024.pdf>.

⁶⁴ Richard Adams, 'English Universities Face Autumn "Tipping Point" as Financial Crisis Looms', *The Guardian*, 9 August 2024, sec. Education, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/article/2024/aug/09/english-universities-face-autumn-tipping-point-as-financial-crisis-looms>.

⁶⁵ 'Finances', Universities UK, accessed 12 September 2024, <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/features/higher-education-facts-and-figures-2023/finances>.

⁶⁶ Office for Students, 'Consistency Needed: Care Experienced Students and Higher Education'.

⁶⁷ NNECL, 'Quality Mark Guidance: June 2021'.

⁶⁸ Department for Education, 'Pupil premium: overview', February 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/pupil-premium/pupil-premium>

⁶⁹ Office for Students, 'Access and Participation Data Dashboard'.

⁷⁰ For the purpose of verification, this would be for students that have been classified as independent students on the basis of estrangement by Student Finance England.

⁷¹ Student Loans Company, 'Estranged students & care leavers by HEP: AYs 2017/18 - 2022/23', January 2023, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/estranged-students-care-leavers-by-hep-ays-201718-202223>

⁷² HEPI, 'Implementing a Minimum Income Standard for students', May 2024, <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/05/24/implementing-a-minimum-income-standard-for-students/#:~:text=Minimum%20Income%20Standards&text=The%20report%20calculates%20that%2C%20including,in%20London%20to%20meet%20MIS>.

⁷³ Research Professional News, 'Jacqui Smith: 'sustainable HE funding' is 'foundation for reform'', September 2024, <https://www.researchprofessionalnews.com/rr-news-uk-politics-2024-9-jacqui-smith-sustainable-he-funding-is-foundation-for-reform/>

⁷⁴ UCAS, 'Living costs for full-time students', <https://www.ucas.com/student-finance-england/living-costs-full-time-students>

⁷⁵ 'THE CENTRE FOR TRANSFORMING ACCESS AND STUDENT OUTCOMES IN HIGHER EDUCATION - Charity 1193025', Charity Commission for England and Wales, accessed 18

September 2024, <https://register-of-charities.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-search/-/charity-details/5154824>.

⁷⁶ Frank Young and Danniell Lilley, 'Breaking the Care Ceiling' (Civitas, September 2023), <https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/Breaking-the-care-ceiling.pdf>.

⁷⁷ 'Applicant Index Report', Unite Students, 15 July 2024, <https://www.unitegroup.com/applicant-index-report>.

⁷⁸ Department for Education, 'Explore Education Statistics', GOV.UK, accessed 13 September 2024, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england/2023?subjectId=e6c62cb5-618e-47d4-3dfd-08dc53c3028d>.

⁷⁹ 'What Is the Journey to a Million?', UCAS, 10 February 2023, <https://www.ucas.com/about-us/journey-million/what-journey-million>.

⁸⁰ David Kernohan, 'Is It Time to Think Again about Student Number Controls?', *Wonkhe* (blog), 14 March 2022, <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/is-it-time-to-think-again-about-student-number-controls/>.

⁸¹ J Sebba et al., 'Phase One Evaluation of the Virtual School Head's Extension of Duties to Children with a Social Worker and the Post-16 Pupil Premium plus Pilot: Evaluation Report' (Department for Education, December 2022), https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6396fe808fa8f55303f6e2a8/VSH_extension_evaluation_December_2022.pdf.

⁸² 'Small Group Tuition', EEF, accessed 13 September 2024, <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/education-evidence/teaching-learning-toolkit/small-group-tuition>.

⁸³ Sally Weale, 'School Heads Urge Labour to Continue Funding National Tutoring Scheme', *The Guardian*, 11 July 2024, sec. Education, <https://www.theguardian.com/education/article/2024/jul/11/headteachers-urge-labour-continue-funding-national-tutoring-scheme>.

⁸⁴ Ben Savours and Maria Rodriguez, 'The Economic Impact of the National Tutoring Programme' (Public First, 15 January 2023), <https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Economic-impact-of-the-National-tutoring-Programme-1.pdf>.

⁸⁵ Niamh O Regan and Aveek Bhattacharya, 'Fulfilling Its Potential?' (Social Market Foundation, 2022).

⁸⁶ UCAS, 'Next Steps: What Is the Experience of Students from a Care Background in Education?', November 2022, <https://www.ucas.com/about-us/news-and-insights/ucas-reports/next-steps-what-experience-students-care-background-education-report>.

⁸⁷ O Regan and Bhattacharya, 'Fulfilling Its Potential?'

⁸⁸ John Simes, 'Widening Participation in Higher Education, Academic Year 2021/22', GOV.UK, 13 July 2023, <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education>.

⁸⁹ TASO, 'Education pathways: Equality gaps in earnings and employment', October 2024, <https://taso.org.uk/research/current-projects/education-earnings-employment/>

⁹⁰ Campbell, S., Macmillan, L., Wyness, G. 'Mismatch in higher education: prevalence, drivers and outcomes', December 2019, <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Wyness-42856-Executive-Summary-Nov19.pdf>

⁹¹ UCAS, 'Undergraduate end of cycle data resources 2023', <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-undergraduate-end-cycle-data-resources-2023>

⁹² Department for Education, 'Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation Children's Social Care Reform 2023', February 2023, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/642460653d885d000fdade73/Children_s_social_care_stable_homes_consultation_February_2023.pdf.

⁹³ Department for Education.

⁹⁴ Children and Families Directorate, 'CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE (SCOTLAND) ACT 2014: Statutory Guidance on Part 9: Corporate Parenting' (Scottish Government, 14 August 2015), <https://www.gov.scot/publications/statutory-guidance-part-9-corporate-parenting-children-young-people-scotland/documents/>.

⁹⁵ APPG for Care-Experienced Children and Young People, 'Inquiry on Extending Corporate Parenting Responsibilities across the Public Sector' (Become, March 2024), <https://becomecharity.org.uk/content/uploads/2024/03/APPG-Corporate-Parenting-Inquiry-Final-Report.pdf>.

⁹⁶ Children and Families Directorate, 'Caring for Our Children and Young People: Corporate Parenting Update 2018 to 2021' (Scottish Government, 9 December 2021), <https://www.gov.scot/publications/caring-children-young-people-update-scotlands-corporate-parenting-2018-21/>.

⁹⁷ Department for Education, 'Children's Social Care: Stable Homes, Built on Love Government Consultation Response', September 2023, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/650966a322a783001343e844/Children_s_Social_Care_Stable_Homes__Built_on_Love_consultation_response.pdf.

⁹⁸ 'Care Leaver Covenant Overview' (Care Leaver Covenant, October 2023), <https://mycovenant.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/CLC-Intro-Leaflet-Branded-With-Sign-up-Steps-Oct-2023.pdf>.

⁹⁹ Become, 'Press release: 33% increase in homelessness among care leavers', October 2023, <https://becomecharity.org.uk/press-release-33-increase-in-homelessness-among-care-leavers/#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20care%20leavers,to%203%2C710%20for%202022%2F23>.

¹⁰⁰ BBC, 'Starmer vows all military veterans will get homes', September 2024, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cz6wdg9x0qdo>