

Supporting care leavers into higher education: The H.E. Handbook for Care Leavers (Who Cares? Trust, 2014)

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Abstract

A good education forms a cornerstone in the foundation for a positive future. For all children and young people it offers the basis for a later career, a potential route out of disadvantage and an environment in which to learn the crucial social skills necessary for succeeding in adult life and forming positive, healthy relationships.

Keywords

Children in care, care leavers, university, education, higher education, education support, local authority, school, college.

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A good education forms a cornerstone in the foundation for a positive future. For all children and young people it offers the basis for a later career, a potential route out of disadvantage and an environment in which to learn the crucial social skills necessary for succeeding in adult life and forming positive, healthy relationships.

Unfortunately, far too many looked after children do not have a positive experience of education and their outcomes frequently fall well below those of their peers.

Young people from care, as a group, face a wide range of challenges. They are over-represented in all of society's most disadvantaged groups: the homeless, the unemployed, those within the criminal justice system and those with mental health needs. Collectively, children in care and care leavers are among the worst-performing groups in the education system. Compared to their peers, they are more likely to have lower levels of educational qualification (an average tariff score of 86 in 2012/13 compared to an average of 407 for all children) and less likely to go on to positive destinations after school (The Scottish Government, 2014).

Too few young people from care go on to further and higher education. The number currently in higher education nine months after leaving school is around 3% in Scotland, compared to 36% of young people in general. Greater numbers go on to further education (33%) but after a further six months this drops to 24%. Although direct comparisons with

the rest of the UK are not possible because of the difference in education systems, this reflects a general trend across the nations; in England the number of care leavers going on to HE has remained fairly constant at 6% over a number of years.

These statistics are not an indication that children in care are not as clever or as capable as other children. They are the result of a range of complex and interconnected factors that influence their experiences at school, their ability to engage with education and the support they receive to help them achieve.

The picture is not all bleak either. Like other children, those in care possess a wide range of talents, abilities and resources and can flourish if given time, encouragement and the right support. Reports from the Children's Rights Director have frequently shown that looked after children value education highly and want to succeed in it. Similarly, our own research has shown that many more young people from care aspire to go on to university than the current proportion who actually enrol.

Taking the step from school to college or university is an act of aspiration. It is a significant step for any young person but the particular challenges that young people from care face can make it all the more daunting. It is not surprising that as well as having poorer outcomes than their peers at a school level, young people from care are less likely to progress into further and higher education and more likely to struggle to complete their course if they do.

At the point of deciding whether to go on to college and university, many looked after young people and care leavers will be living independently and making these big life decisions without the safety net of a parent to fall back on. They will also have to cope with additional risks related to finance and accommodation. These extra responsibilities can make it difficult to focus on studies and make university seem too big a financial risk.

Despite the relatively low numbers progressing into further and higher education, much has been achieved over the last ten years in terms of raising awareness among universities and colleges across the UK about the needs of care leavers, particularly by Buttle UK through their quality mark programme. Alongside raising awareness, the quality mark has helped to push up the quality of support provided by universities and colleges and placed this issue high on the policy agenda. Nevertheless, barriers remain.

In 2011, we conducted a piece of research ([Open Doors, Open Minds](#), Who Cares? Trust, 2012) to assess the barriers to success in education faced by children and young people from care in England. The results revealed a significant lack of information and awareness among children, young people and the professionals caring for and supporting them about post-16 education options and the support available to young people from care.

Where information was available, it was often patchy, inconsistent and not always accessible. Changes in policy from 2010 led to more confusion about the provision available for care leavers and a loss of particular advice and support systems which had focused on, or provided specific services for them.

At the same time, we were regularly hearing from children and young people through our participation work and projects, and through the All-Party Parliamentary Group for

Looked-After Children and Care Leavers, that they were unsure about the support they could get to continue in education and that they were not always receiving sufficient help to enable them to pursue their aspirations.

Some young people, for instance, reported that they were advised to attend universities close to them, instead of moving away to attend the particular course or institution they wanted to, or risk losing certain elements of support, such as their flat.

Alongside *Open Doors*, *Open Minds*, we undertook a short analysis of university access agreements for the academic year 2012/13, which revealed a wide variation in support for care leavers. These were fairly inaccessible documents and, according to colleagues in higher education institutions, often did not include a full description of the support provided. Young people clearly need a comprehensive and accessible source of information about the support available to them in higher education generally and the support provided by specific institutions, so that they can make a fully-informed choice based on their needs and the course they want to pursue.

In some areas, higher education institutions had come together to provide this and were doing an excellent job; however, it was being done on a regional basis and was not happening everywhere. Too often care leavers were being encouraged to attend a local university for reasons of cost or convenience to the local authority, rather than because it was best for them, so we felt there was a need for a national resource. Consultation with colleagues in the education sector revealed their support and the *H.E. Handbook for Care Leavers* was born.

In order to provide something truly useful that would give care leavers the key information needed to make a decision about higher education, we had to speak to the experts. Luckily, we received a huge amount of support and enthusiasm from the sector and were able to draw together an advisory group of young people from care, social work professionals, voluntary sector experts and education professionals. This was made up of young people and professionals from Thanet College, University College London, Buttle UK, Nottingham Trent University, Salford University, the London Borough of Richmond and Ealing, and De Montfort University.

The group, alongside further consultation with young people from care, helped us to identify a 'good practice' level of support that an institution should provide to a care leaver. This covers ten areas and includes: a named officer and specific webpage for care leavers, pre-application support, 365-day accommodation and targeted funding. The group also helped us to think through our methods of data collection, the design of the resource and to raise awareness of the handbook among the sector.

The first version of *The H.E Handbook* focused on England was published in January 2012, setting out exactly what universities and colleges offered to care-experienced students on higher education courses. Since then the Trust has produced two further editions - extending to include Scotland from our second year - with increasing engagement from the sector year-on-year.

The latest version contains entries from a total of 140 universities and colleges: 118 higher education institutions and 22 further education institutions. The edition for Scotland has full representation from all Scottish universities. Due to the reforms to the college sector in Scotland in 2013, the 2014 edition includes only one college, but we are confident that this will increase vastly in the next edition as we know there is a high level of interest and enthusiasm from colleges.

Over the last two years, we have responded to feedback received about the handbook by refining the content to make it more relevant to care leavers' needs. For instance, in the 2014 edition, as well as asking whether institutions provided 365-day accommodation, we asked whether they provided 'support to find' 365-day accommodation if it was not available directly from them. This is crucial for many care leavers who often lack family homes to return to during the holidays, and who may have to 'sofa-surf' or become homeless without help to secure somewhere to live out of term times.

In 2014 we strengthened the Scottish edition of the handbook, with the help of colleagues from the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland (CELCIS), the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS), Who Cares? Scotland, NUS Scotland, Buttle UK, the Scottish Funding Council and others, adding more tailored content about support provision as well as information for students from both countries wishing to study in the other.

Since the very start we've worked in close collaboration with the sector in both England and Scotland on this project and have received fantastic support. Many colleges and universities now link to the handbook from their websites; we know that local authorities often signpost to it from their websites, newsletters and financial policies and UCAS includes a link under its 'Advice for Care Leavers' section. All of this helps us to reach out to young people from care. Evidence shows that this happens mostly through professionals, who use the guide to inform and support the young people they work with and to help them make choices about their future.

The handbook is still in its early years and challenges remain. One of those is to engage a greater number of further education institutions who provide higher education courses, as we know that this may well be where many care leavers will choose to study.

There is also far more that we need to know about how the handbook is being used and what impact it has both on young people's decisions about whether or not to attend university, and on whether they are able to make a more informed choice and find the institution that can best meet their needs, enabling them to stay the course. We want to reach even more young people and make the handbook more interactive too.

We also recognise that, while it is important to encourage and enable more young people from care to pursue university courses, further education will be the right option for many of them. We need to ensure that those young people are just as informed and supported.

Over the next six months, thanks to funding from the Scottish Funding Council, The Who Cares? Trust will produce a pilot version of a brand new handbook for care leavers wishing to study further education courses in Scotland. Over the summer and early autumn we will

be in touch with colleges to collect information about the support they provide and the new *F.E. Handbook for Care Leavers in Scotland* will be published in January 2015.

One thing is abundantly clear: we must continue to focus on narrowing the gap for children in care, reducing inequality and enabling children and young people to fulfil their potential no matter where they live, or where they study.

End Notes

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