

Care to listen and learn

The experience of care leavers in higher education

Research Summary

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Abstract

Only a minority of young people leaving care progress on to higher education, therefore ensuring their inclusion and retention is imperative. This research explores the experiences of learners identified as 'care leavers' within one higher education institution and highlights specific factors that have affected their inclusion and retention. The methodological approach was grounded in social research philosophy and the experiences of the learners were sought through semi-structured interviews. The thematic analysis illuminated the diversity of the learners and their experiences, with several key similarities that affected progression. These were identified as the need for pre-entry and enrolment information, advice and guidance, continued dialogue with University staff and the timely provision of financial, practical and personal support services.

A range of recommendations were co-produced with the learners that called for universities, social services, colleges and sixth forms to work collaboratively to address the challenges of inclusion and retention in accordance with the *student life-cycle*. The learners' voices in the research provide an in-depth narrative of university life, which if listened to and acted upon, could increase the participation of young people leaving care in higher education and ensure they have a positive and successful experience.

1. Research questions

- What are the experiences of learners identified as 'care leavers' within the University?
- What services does the University have specifically for care leavers and are they effective in supporting a positive learning journey?
- Are there specific factors that affect the inclusion and retention of care leavers?

2. Background

There are currently 60,900 children and young people identified as looked-after children (*Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) 25/2009*). Although a fluctuating and diverse group of children and young people, this figure has remained relatively unchanged for ten years. Yet, despite the introduction of legislation and policy, significant disparities in the educational attainment and progression of looked-after children in comparison with other children remains.

Following difficulties experienced by the child or young person, the State takes them into care for their own protection and wellbeing. But the truth is that many children and young people in care do not then receive a good quality learning experience. (*DCSF 2009:2*)

The absence of a good learning experience in primary and secondary education has resulted in low levels of attainment and progression for looked-after children. Only 7% of looked after children obtained five A*- C grade GCSEs (*DCSF 25/2009*) – the level increasingly seen as the basic threshold for employability – compared unfavourably with 67.1% of all children. Consequentially, this level of inequality continues beyond compulsory schooling with looked-after children being one of the most under-represented and disadvantaged groups within higher education.

Alarmingly, 37% of young people leaving care are not in education, employment or training (*DCSF 25/2009*). Furthermore, there are disproportionately high numbers of teenage pregnancies, homelessness and incarceration among this group, with only 7% progressing on to higher education (*DCSF 2009:41; DCSF 25/2009*). Government is upholding a 50% higher education participation rate target for people aged 18 – 30 (*BIS 2009*), with the current rate at 43% (*DIUS 2009*) this is strong evidence of the under-representation and exclusion of care leavers in higher education.

To address this, there has been research and numerous widening participation initiatives leading to an increased commitment from higher education institutions to include care leavers. This, coupled with the implementation of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, has been instrumental in increasing the numbers of care leavers accessing higher education by 6% over the past five years. Widening participation to higher education has been key to assist under-represented groups' to access higher education. However, accessing higher education is only the first stage of the learning journey. There are issues of inclusion, retention and completion that learners and higher education institutions grapple with; it is this complex relationship within one higher education institution that has been investigated.

3. The institution

The research higher education institution is a post-1992 institution with a large diverse student population and within the research was given the pseudonym of Shenstone University. The University has a clear statement of commitment to supporting the progression of care leavers and has received the 'Frank Buttle Quality Mark' in 2008. The research took place from October 2009 to August 2010 and involved 13 learners identified as care leavers who enrolled at the University in September 2008. For that reason it is recognised that the learners may not have benefited from the

numerous initiatives that currently exist for children in care prior to entering higher education, for example: virtual heads.

Although time associated, the learners experience very much reflects their experience of the University and experiences of potential students. Table 1 shows the progression data for full time undergraduates enrolled in September 2008 and progression on to the second year of study in September 2009.

	Whole learner population	Care leavers
Progressed to second year of study	73%	66%
Repeating first year of study	9%	12%
Excluded	12%	20%
Withdrawn	2%	2%

Source: University Planning Office and Care Leavers Coordination Team

The comparisons were quite disheartening with a higher percentage of care leavers being excluded than the average learner population. To get beneath the statistics to gain greater understanding of the data, a qualitative exploration of care leavers' experience of the University was required.

4. Methodology

The methodological approach was grounded in social research philosophy and underpinned by an interpretivism philosophy. An extensive literature review was conducted examining the three themes, policy and guidance defining the purpose of higher education, factors of retention and progression and the experiences of young people leaving care.

The research process involved two stages. Firstly, an audit was conducted of the policies and services in place at the University for care leavers. The audit was conducted through internet searches and the gathering of materials from the University, which provided a range of secondary data.

The second stage of the research involved gathering primary data directly from the learners using qualitative methods. The collection of primary qualitative data allowed for an in-depth account of the learners' experience of the University to be gathered. The primary data was collected via semi-structured interviews either face to face or via telephone depending on what was most suitable for the learner. The interview structure was based on the pre-identified set of themes drawn from the literature review:

- Pre-entry
- Enrolment and induction
- Institutional and subject match
- Academic experience
- Social integration and relations
- Financial issues
- Support service and structures
- Personal circumstance

Demographic data was also collected from each learner. Each interview was fully transcribed and sent to the learner for approval. The qualitative data was thematically analysed to illuminate the experiences of the learners in relation to pre-determined themes.

5. Sample

Sixty-two learners were identified, all of whom were invited to participate. The learner sample was drawn from those that volunteered. Fifteen learners volunteered to participate in the research. However, two learners registered as care leavers where actually not care leavers. The final sample included thirteen learners; ten learners participated in the interview process and three learners provided a statement of their experience as they did not wish to participate in a full interview.

6. Findings

University audit

The audit confirmed that the University has a Care Leaver Scheme which provides a specific package of services that looks to address potential stress factors (Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley 2005) and minimise the barriers to non completion (Martin and Jackson 2002).

The University Access agreement and the Care Leavers Scheme flyer lists the range of provisions provided to learners who have been in care, some of which echoes the effective practices of the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark Practice Guide (2010). But, due to unknown dissemination methods of these materials, limited accessibility to the information via the website and the separation of information from the mainstream student information, the level of learner knowledge and usage of services was questionable. The second stage of the research identified whether the Scheme was effective in supporting a positive learning journey through exploring the learners' experiences.

Learners' experience

An individual learner profile was documented for each learner based on their demographic data and overall experience of the University. The following ten learners were all interviewed, pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Alice

"Rarely have I met people that have had plain-sailing with the university."

- Current student,
- Disclosed a disability,
- Born in the UK.

Chantelle

"I just stopped going, I didn't tell anyone. No one contacted me to find out why I left."

- Left University due to financial factors, registered as excluded,
- Born in UK.

Dean

"I felt quite disenfranchised...On the whole I enjoyed what I learnt. But as a disabled person in that particular institution I felt demoralised by the experience I had."

- Excluded, due to lack of support and communication,
- Disclosed a disability,
- Born in Africa.

Fernando

"Shenstone University, I actually quiet enjoyed it."

- Current student, progressed successfully
- Born in UK.

<p>John</p> <p>“Overall it has been ok, I am happy with my achievements. It is not really what I was expecting”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current student, progressed successfully, • Born in Africa. 	<p>Mary</p> <p>“It’s been a challenge that I have enjoyed”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Current student, progressed successfully, • Born in Africa.
<p>Maya</p> <p>“It’s been up and down really. Sometimes I enjoy it and sometimes I think why I even went to university.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progressing successfully, • Born in UK. 	<p>Rachel</p> <p>“It is ok. There are positive and negative sides; I think the positives out way the negatives.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progressing successfully, • Born in Africa.
<p>Sam</p> <p>“It has been alright, but I feel like I missed out on stuff I just didn’t know about.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progressing successfully, • Born in Africa. 	<p>Tiffany</p> <p>“The University has been a great teacher; I didn’t expect the university to be as good as it is.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Progressing successfully, • Born in Africa.

The following learners did not wish to participate in the full interview, but provided brief statements of their experience. This was unfortunate because they were all former students of the University.

<p>Gemma</p> <p>“I chose to leave; I wanted to do a different course which Shenstone didn’t offer”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Left University to enrol at a different university, • Born in UK. 	<p>Laura</p> <p>“They wouldn’t accept my results and wanted me to do a foundation course. So I went to a different <i>University</i> and they accepted me onto the degree”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Did not enrol, current student at a different University. • Born in Europe.
<p>Sandra</p> <p>“I was meant to start, but couldn’t for personal reasons”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Registered, but did not enrol • Born in Europe 	

The following themed sections highlight the learners’ experiences:

Pre-entry

All the learners had attended College or Sixth Form College prior to attending University. There were some difficulties in initially accessing College for Sam who didn’t hold UK qualifications:

“It was very hard for me to access A Levels, because I didn’t have GSCE’s. I went to 4 colleges, but they all refused me...it was so painful because I knew I could do it, I had qualifications from back home, but no certificates to prove it. Then my social worker gave me details of some colleges...I went to one and they gave me a mini test and said I could do A levels”

Sam

The qualification route of the learners varied and was dependent upon personal preference. Each learner completed their chosen pre-entry course achieving the appropriate entry qualifications to

access the higher education course of their choice. Eight of the learners chose the University, because of its good location. However, one learner felt lost in the process and wished she had received guidance to make an informed decision:

“I did not really have clue about universities and which ones to pick. I wish I had someone who sat with me and said which ones were good and bad. I didn’t go to any open days which I really regret...I actually just picked anything and I got into Shenstone University.”

Maya

The learners all stated that they received pre-entry information on completing UCAS forms and student loan applications. However, the learners received very limited advice on the entitlements they could access as care leavers. Eight learners had no knowledge of the University Care Leavers’ Scheme, scholarships or additional funds they could access at the University.

“No no, I didn’t know anything about this. If I had this support it would have been really beneficial.”

Rachel

“They didn’t provide any advice or guidance and nothing about what I could be entitled too.”

Chantelle

The learners’ responses highlighted a genuine issue with the quantity and quality of pre-entry information, advice and guidance given to learners about their entitlements as care leavers. Information, advice and guidance about higher education should be delivered in a timely manner in partnership with colleges and social services to ensure that no learner misses out or has a negative experience due to a lack of information.

Enrolment and induction

All the learners were asked about their experience of the enrolment and induction period to assess whether it could have impacted on their overall university experience. Only five learners went to the Fresher’s Fair and all felt it was uneventful. Those that did not attend could not do so due to work commitments, the distance from their accommodation or due to lack of information about the Fairs.

Institutional and subject match

The National Audit Office (2007) reported a link between early withdrawal, poor course choice and un-met expectations. This was only accurate for one learner, Gemma. When exploring the issue of expectations, three learners stated they had unmet expectations about the University.

“My expectations were really high and I was expecting more support from the university staff. I am not happy with the way some things are going.”

John

“I had big expectations and unfortunately these have not all worked out. For example, I was hoping the university would help find a job placement for me, but the university doesn’t bother to provide this. Compare to other universities I actually regret that I chose Shenstone University.”

Rachel

“...everyone always say university is the best time of your life...University, I thought it was going to be completely different...I didn’t realise it was going to be so independent. I wish someone told me that you are practically by yourself, so I could have prepared. I think that if I had had a Uni student come and talk to me before I went it would have been really helpful.”

Maya

Academic experience

The academic experiences of the learners varied greatly. Each learner was studying a different course, which made it difficult to draw comparisons across departments. The majority of the learners who still enrolled at the University had a reasonably good academic experience

One interesting factor was that the majority of the learners did not utilise the personal tutoring system at the University to support their academic progression. The learners appeared to have a limited understanding of the role of a personal tutor. Two learners thought that “you only see them [tutors] if you have got problems” (Tiffany). The other eight learners all stated that they had not had much support or interaction with tutors and would value more. Two learners had poor experience based on staff attitudes and practices towards disability and recommending training and information dissemination to raise awareness of diversity and the responsibility of the institution and staff to implement reasonable adjustments.

Social integration and relations

None of the learners that either did not enrol at the University or withdrew early did so because of issues relating to their social experience. Although, the learners suggested that that greater social involvement may have improved her overall university experience:

“I just used to go for the classes and then leave. The social experience was so boring...I would have liked to have been involved with more stuff and meet more people, it would have probably made the experience a bit better.”

Chantelle

There was a split amongst the learners about their social experience, potentially reflecting them as individuals and their expectations about the social side of University life. Two of the learners were happy with their social experience. The others felt that the University had a limited range of social events or activities, and did little to encourage social interaction across the University. Consequently, learners created friendships within their courses or had a social life based on previous friendships not associated with the University.

“There are no social activities...there are really none unless you want to do down to the bar and get wrecked every night. I ended up starting up my own society, the Rock Society, purely because there were no events.”

Alice

“They don’t really put much on at the University. There are not many groups, not many different sport groups...I feel my nights out have nothing to do with University.”

Fernando

“The only friends I have at Uni were those I was doing coursework with. I never talked to anyone that was not doing my course, I wish I had the opportunity to I think it would have made a difference.”

Mary

Financial issues

The extent of financial difficulties varied, but appeared relative to the learner’s knowledge regarding financial entitlements and funding sources at the University. All, but two, of the learners knew about the care leavers grant of £1000. However, none knew anything about the care leavers’ scholarship or the additional funds they could have accessed.

“It is difficult managing finance...I did not know about the scholarships or anything, no one told me and it hurts as I missed out.”

Sam

“I don’t know about them [scholarships and funds]. I would have applied - any financial support is a bonus.”

Fernando

Mary and Chantelle had the most difficult time out of the learners:

“I did not get the care leavers’ grant, I only found out about it in my third year. I missed out of £2000 and they don’t back date it. I wish I had information about the care leaver grants, scholarships and trusts earlier, because I have missed out on so much money that could have been so much help.”

Mary

The lack of finance and outstanding debts where the significant factors that lead to Chantelle to withdraw from the University.

“I think the debt was one of the main factors. I just couldn’t afford to study full time and work part time as it just wasn’t enough money to pay the bills and the debt – I had to get a full time job...I didn’t know anything about the care leaver’s service and I received no support at all, nothing what so ever...Social services never told me about the £1000 grant either.”

Chantelle

The financial challenges facing learners could be greatly improved through the coordination of information between the University and social services. The University Care Leavers Scheme offers learners additional financial support, however it is evident that this information is not effectively disseminated to learners so they can access funds in a timely manner.

Support service and structures

Generally the learners’ knowledge and experience of the Care Leaver’s Scheme and support services at the University was very poor. At the interview stage, the learners only knew about the Care Leaver Scheme, because of the £1000 grant it provided them. Although their experiences of the Scheme differed, there was an evident lack of information being provided to them. With many of the learners missing out on services that could have been beneficial to them;

“I didn’t know about the Care Leavers’ Scheme or link person...I would have liked someone like this. Someone to talk to on a certain level about anything you feel like...I think it is importance for the University to provide this and tell us”

Sam

“I could have done with help to sort out my accommodation, I had a few problems”

Fernando

“I didn’t know anything about the care leavers’ service and I received no support at all. I definitely would have used the services and the link person had I known; it would have made a real difference.”

Chantelle

The learners experiences of the University’s other support service was also quite limited, with the majority of the learners stating that they did not know what the University offered students.

Personal circumstance

The majority of the learners felt that being in care had affected their University experience. The learners felt they had less of a support network than other learners, and greater responsibility for their own wellbeing and success without a family to rely on for accommodation and financial support.

The learners also stated that they do not openly disclose that they had been in care, unless it was for their own benefit, for example to access funds. The reasons for not disclosing differed, but centred on the concept of becoming the 'excluded other' (Armstrong and Moore 2004) due to the associated rhetoric held by society of looked after children.

7. Conclusion

Despite the limited amount of literature regarding the experiences of care leavers in higher education, the themes and stress factors identified over five years ago (Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley 2005; Martin and Jackson 2002) remain relevant today with the learners facing similar financial and support challenges.

Although the research sample was small, the learners' experiences provide a genuine insight into *student life*. There was variance in the learners' experiences, with the assigned progress codes not necessarily representing their actual experience. Several key similarities were drawn from the research findings that could be identified as retention factors. The factors were a lack of information, advice and guidance at the pre-entry stage and beyond and limited communication with the University staff. The amalgamation of these two factors, consequently led to an absence of financial, practical and personal support. All of which effected the learners retention, the level at which they participated in University life and felt included by the institution.

The audit proved that the provision of these factors was the responsibility of the University Care Leavers' Scheme and through the learner interviews it became evident that the Scheme was not adequately functioning in these three areas. Evidence of this is seen by the limited knowledge and interaction the learners had with the Scheme. All the learners, including those that were successfully progressing at the University, missed out on essential pre-entry information, advice and guidance, which resulted in them having minimal knowledge of their entitlements and accessing these in a timely manner.

Linked directly to the lack of information, was the learners' limited communication with the Scheme link worker, the dedicated adviser for care leavers. Some of learners had a vague recollection of being sent an initial email about the care leavers' grant, but nothing beyond this. Once informed about the range of provision available, each learner identified at least one provision they would have accessed. Highlighting, the importance of ensuring all care leavers are aware of the Scheme and the dedicated link worker; the Scheme should be a hub of advice, guidance and support throughout a learner's time at University. To establish this, effective and continued dialogue between the learners and the University staff needs to be maintained from pre-entry stage and onwards.

Furthermore, for the Care Leaver Scheme to be effective there needs to be a joined up departmental approach, underpinned by effective pro-active dialogue between the staff and the learners. This would avoid learners going unnoticed and being excluded through a lack of dialogue.

Increasing retention is vital for all stakeholders (Yorke and Longden 2004); for government increased retention push up the national average and provides a greater number of graduates in the labour market. For higher education institutions greater learner retention equates directly to financial savings. The non-completion of 575 learners in 2008/09 resulted in a loss of £4.4 million, £7652.17

per student (University Planning Office 2009). Therefore, the University could have saved £91,826.40 had it retained the twelve care leavers who were excluded. For learners, higher education provides an opportunity to broaden their future prospects and escape potential social exclusion.

8. Recommendations

The following recommendations were developed collaboratively with the learners. Although specific to the research University, they can be applied across the sector as good practice examples to encourage participation and improve retention:

To raise the aspirations of children in care and increase participation rates, Universities should work in partnerships with social services, schools and colleges to develop targeted programmes for the learners and care workers. There is a need to provide young people in care with role models who have experience of higher education; this could be achieved through mentoring programmes and up-skilling care workers who can have limited knowledge of the higher education sector (Lache 2009).

Develop an information, advice and guidance model based on the student-life cycle (pre-entry, enrolment, progression and graduation) to ensure learners receive accurate and appropriate information in a timely manner. This could be done through learner packs, events, summer schools and web forums using institutions virtual learning environments.

Develop a cohesive marketing and dissemination strategy for general and specific learner information and materials. To ensure that learners have access to all the information about the University services, including the Care Leavers' Scheme, in one accessible place.

Work in partnership with social services, colleges and sixth forms to raise awareness and disseminate information, advice and guidance about opportunities at University and the services available.

A more pro-actively approach by the Scheme Coordinator and link worker to engage in dialogue with the learners, to provide the services stated in the Scheme flyer.

Collaboratively develop an effective learner check-up plan, led by the link worker and developed with the learners. This would encourage continued dialogue with learners to address issues as they arise, as well as tracking their progression. This should involve follow up with the learners who have chosen to withdraw from the University.

First priority university halls accommodation should be given to care leavers. This would encourage social integration, as the learners would be on campus. It would also help to break down barriers and remove the feeling of isolation felt by some learners.

Universities should take greater responsibility to encourage and support social interaction and cohesion across the learner population. This could be done through establishing a learner led peer mentoring and networking scheme, either online or face to face, or by liaising with the Student Union to host more on and off site events and activities.

Raise awareness of diversity across the staff and learner population, especially disability equality, through training, workshops or information dissemination to develop a more inclusive social and learning environment for all.

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