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Transitions to, through and beyond higher education: An exploration of care experienced students in Wales and England.

Research report.

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Table of Contents	Pages
1. Acknowledgements	4
2. Background	5
2.1. Research questions.....	6
3. Methodology	7
3.1. Methods and sample.....	7
3.2. Terminology.....	8
3.3. Analytic approach.....	9
4. Findings 1: What factors inform transitions to university for care-experienced students?	10
4.1. Prior educational attainments, positive learning identities and supportive teachers.....	10
4.2. University as the ‘only option’ and a route to a positive future.....	12
4.3. Social and cultural contexts: Cultural and social capitals.....	14
5. Findings 2: What are the mechanisms underpinning care-experienced students' successful completion of their studies at university?	16
5.1. Material, emotional and social support.....	16
5.2. Self-determination, drive and resilience.....	17
6. Findings 3. What are care-experienced students and graduates' views on university provision for care-experienced students?	20
6.1 Welsh universities' provision for care experienced students.....	20
6.2. Students and graduates' views on institutional support for care-experienced students.....	21

6.3. What is working well in terms of university support: Student and graduates’ perspectives?.....	22
6.4. Students and graduates’ views on where improvements could be made?.....	23
7. Findings 4. What are the barriers and facilitators to students' transitions to employment and education opportunities upon graduation?.....	27
8. Conclusions.....	29
8.1. Future directions for the research.....	30
9. Recommendations.....	31
9.1 Recommendations for schools and colleges in England and Wales.....	31
9.2. Recommendations for universities and HE providers.....	31
9.3. Recommendations for fostering charities and organisations.....	32
References.....	33
Annex A: Participant information sheet (sample).....	37
Annex B: Participant consent form (sample).....	41
Annex B: Participant recruitment flyer.....	42

1. Acknowledgments

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2. Background

Care-experienced young people have some of the lowest rates of participation in higher education (HE) in the UK (Jackson and Ajayi 2007; Department for Education 2014), with roughly 12% of care leavers progressing to HE compared to 43% of the wider population (Harrison 2020). Care-experienced graduates are also less likely to achieve first or upper-second class degrees than non-care-experienced graduates (Harrison, Baker and Stevenson 2022), yet they are slightly more likely to progress onto post-graduate taught masters programmes than non-care-experienced students (Harrison et al., 2022). Whilst extensive research has highlighted the factors which facilitate care-experienced students' access to university (Jackson and Anjayi 2007), except for a few recent important studies (Baker 2022; Baker et al., 2022; Baker 2024) there has been considerably less attention to their transitions from university to life beyond it. This leaves a substantial gap in knowledge regarding the mechanisms which support care-experienced students' successful transitions from undergraduate study to opportunities upon graduation. This is a significant omission given that care-experienced young people are one of the most marginalised and disadvantaged cohorts of young people and that participation in HE is associated with more prosperous social and economic outcomes (Britton et al., 2016). Exploring the mechanisms which underpin their successful transitions to, and completion of, university study is therefore an important line of enquiry.

As researchers have sought to understand care-experienced students' successful transitions to and outcomes in HE, they have highlighted the numerous factors which help to explain why some care-experienced young people are successful in transitioning to HE and successful in it (Cotton et al., 2014; Harrison 2020). These factors include good prior educational attainment, supportive and encouraging adults (Driscoll 2013), stable and supportive school and care placements and good financial support (Jackson and Cameron 2012). Notwithstanding the important insights provided by such research, there has been a distinct paucity of attention to the role of wider social contexts in care-experienced young people's transitions to university, their experiences of it and transitions to life after undergraduate study.

The aims of the project were fourfold; to identify the factors that inform care-experienced students' transitions to and experiences of HE; to identify the mechanisms which support care-experienced students' successful completion of their degree courses; to identify the barriers and facilitators in reaching a range of destinations following graduation and to elucidate students and graduates' views on institutional support for care-experienced students. To achieve these aims, the research placed a particular lens on the role of wider social contexts, including participants' social, cultural and economic resources and capitals in their transitions to university, their experiences of it and, amongst the

graduates, transitions from students to graduates. Through careful examination of these issues, the study ultimately aimed to improve the HE experiences and overall life chances of this cohort of marginalised young people by garnering a more sophisticated understanding of the barriers and facilitators to positive HE experiences and transitions to life after undergraduate study. Developing this understanding is important if wider patterns of inequalities for care-experienced young people and adults are to be disrupted.

2.1. Research Questions

- What factors inform care-experienced students' transitions to and experiences of university?
- What are the mechanisms underpinning care-experienced students' successful completion of their studies at university?
- What are care-experienced students and graduates' views and perspectives on institutional provision for care-experienced students?
- What are the barriers and facilitators to students' transitions to post-graduation employment and education opportunities?

3. Methodology

3.1. Methods and sample

The broad methodological approach underpinning the research was qualitative. Interviews with nine care-experienced students and seven graduates were conducted between April 2023 and February 2024. In the student sample, two students were studying their degrees at universities in England and six students were enrolled on degrees in Welsh universities. One student participant had dropped out of university at the time of the interview but was planning on returning to 2nd year in September 2023. The graduate sample had achieved either a 1st or a 2:1 in their degrees. Four were undertaking post-graduate study, two were in full-time employment and one was employed whilst undertaking an internship. The graduates were located in England and Wales and one was, at the time of the interview, doing an internship outside of the UK. 13 of the student and graduate participants were aged 18-25 and three were aged 30-49.

The students and graduates were recruited through contacts made with university staff located in student support services, widening participation teams and 'care leaver' contacts in higher education institutions (HEIs). At the time of the research, several universities in Wales had a key contact person whose title was 'care leaver' contact¹. They were also recruited through charities that work with care-experienced young people and foster carers. For a small number of participants, contact had been made with them through a snowballing approach where participants put the researcher in touch with friends or contacts who were care-experienced students and graduates.

Interviews were also conducted with eight university staff whose roles included student support services, employability, widening participation and care leaver leads in universities in Wales. One interview was conducted with a director of a charity which supports care-experienced young people who are transitioning out of care. Interviews with these participants aimed to examine the resources and support available to students during their time at university and in supporting their transitions to life beyond it. To maintain the anonymity of these participants, the general pseudonym 'professional' will be used when discussing data from these interviews.

In addition to interviews with students, graduates and professionals, a scoping exercise was carried out on eight Welsh universities² websites. The aim of this scoping exercise was

¹ Universities in England and Wales tend to use the term care leaver rather than care experienced on their websites. The term 'care experienced' is also used by some universities but financial support is directed to students legally defined as 'care leavers'.

² This included Cardiff University, Swansea University, Aberystwyth University, Bangor University, Cardiff Metropolitan University, University of South Wales, University of Wales Trinity St David's and Wrexham Glyndwr University. The Open University in Wales was excluded because this has a distinct and unique admissions and pedagogic arrangements and practices.

to identify the range and type of support for care-experienced students (including financial, practical, social and emotional support) provided by university in Wales³. This scoping review was carried out between February-June 2023.

The qualitative interviews with students and graduates explored the factors which facilitated their transitions to university, their experiences of university and amongst the graduates, their transitions to their current situation (i.e. employment, study or internship) after graduation. Particular attention was placed on the role of prior educational experiences, key adults and a range of social and cultural resources in their entry to university, experiences of it and transitions to life after undergraduate study (Reay et al., 2001; Jackson and Ayaji 2007). Given that entry to university is the exception rather than the norm for care-experienced young people (Jackson and Ayaji 2007), examining the factors that facilitated care-experienced students' entry to university enabled deeper exploration of the extent to which these factors also inform their transitions to post-graduation destinations. Interviews also explored participants' expectations and aspirations for life after graduation, as well as their engagement with and views on university support for care-experienced students. Interviews with staff explored the range of provision available to care-experienced students, with attention to the extent to which any support is provided to students to support them in making transitions to life after university.

Eleven of the interviews with students and graduates were conducted online via Zoom and five were in-person. Amongst the interviews with staff, four were conducted in-person and five were conducted online using Zoom. All interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder and all lasted between 45 minutes and an hour. Where interviews were conducted in-person, these were carried either in the researcher's office or in an external location, convenient with the participants and researcher (such as a coffee shop).

3.2. Terminology

Following Bayfield (2023), Ellis and Johnston (2022) and Harrison (2017), I use the term care-experienced rather than care leaver when referring to the students and graduate participants. The term care-experienced includes students who have been looked after by the local authority at some point during their childhood, those who were in care over their 16th birthday, as well as those who have received care from social services or social service involvement during their youth but may have remained in the family home. It also included those who were in care during their childhood but who left care before they were 16 and therefore would not technically be classed as care leavers. It also included those who entered higher education after the age of 18 (i.e. as mature students) and so would not be

³ The focus on Welsh universities reflects the original focus of the research which was Welsh universities. The scoping review of websites focused exclusively on universities in Wales. The professionals who were interviewed were all located in Wales, whilst the students and graduates who took part in the research were from universities in England and Wales.

considered care leavers (Harrison 2017). This contrasts to the less inclusive term care leaver which is legally defined in England and Wales as a person who has spent 13 weeks or more in Local Authority care spanning their 16th birthday. Ethical approval was granted by Swansea University ethics board and followed BERA guidelines for conducting ethical research. The data was stored on a password protected PC in the researcher's office.

3.3. Analytic approach.

The data was analysed thematically, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six step process which included coding the data, searching for themes and reviewing and defining themes. Concepts drawn from the sociology of education, including social and cultural resources and capitals (Ball et al. 2002; Reay et al. 2009; Ingram et al. 2023) and learner identities were used to guide the data analysis (Rees et al., 1997; Evans 2021). This approach generated several key themes and sub-themes including those defined by participants' references to prior experiences of learning and schooling and their feelings about education in general and higher education in particular. These references culminated in a theme defined by the concept of learning identities which was used to examine participants' relationships with education and their decisions about transitioning to HE. A further significant theme was defined by participants' references to the role of social and cultural capitals and supportive adults in their decisions and transitions to HE and in their transitions from undergraduate study to life after graduation.

4. Findings 1: What factors inform transitions to university for care-experienced students?

All of the student and graduate participants in this research had experienced significant hurdles and challenges throughout their educational journeys up until their transitions to HE. These were connected to their experiences of care, including having unsupportive or fractured relationships with foster carers, being separated from siblings or experiencing multiple placement and school moves, all of which impacted on their school experiences. For some, the challenges they experienced were connected indirectly to their time in care and included poor mental health, behavioural challenges or academic difficulties. Participants routinely spoke about the setbacks and challenges they had faced during their school years; failing examinations, having to re-sit A-levels or not getting the grades they needed to get into their chosen university course. Despite these challenges, these participants had successfully made it to university, and amongst the graduates, completed their courses. In what follows, I highlight the factors which facilitated the participants' decisions about going to university and their transitions to it.

4.1. Prior educational attainments, positive learning identities and supportive teachers

Perhaps two of the strongest themes to emerge in relation to participants' decisions and transitions to HE was defined firstly by the role played by their academic attainment and learning identities prior to embarking on HE, and secondly by the role of supportive adults, particularly teachers, in their decisions about participating in HE. Several participants alluded to their positive learning identities and good academic attainments prior to going to university. These had important bearing on their views about university and their aspirations for it, as reflected in Sophie and Laura's statement:

So, I'm quite an academic student anyway. I cared a lot about school and stuff (Sophie, student).

...because I loved it [school], I loved school. For me, I wasn't like one of these students. Up until I went into care, I never truanted, I always participated, I would say I was an active member of the school, I was in productions, I was a good student. (Laura, student)

These participants tended to have a strong sense of themselves as learners; they regarded HE as a possible destination following post-compulsory schooling because they had positive orientations towards learning. There was a cyclical element to their academic

achievements and aspirations for HE; their growing academic achievements and positive learner identity during school had stimulated deeper engagement with education and academic achievements which in turn encouraged them to view higher education as a possible option following post-16 education. This was particularly apparent for Keira whose emergent positive learner identity at school, stemming from her academic achievements, stimulated her positive engagement in education which eventually led her to apply for university:

...by the time year 10 came and I sat those year 10 exams, I got a B in one of them, and I think I got a C or a D in another one. I think that was the first time that I got good grades. ... Once I got those grades back, people started looking at me differently. 15 year old me had light bulbs going off in my head going, "Actually I can get positive attention". I started being this extremely high achieving student. (Keira, currently dropped out of university)

For a small number of participants, their positive learning identities and aspirations and expectations to go to university had been fostered by supportive adults, particularly teachers, who encouraged their educational achievements and their positive learning identities. Supportive, caring and encouraging adults play a crucial role in care-experienced young people's educational experiences, aspirations and transitions to HE (Jackson and Ayaji 2007; Cotton et al., 2014; Mannay et al., 2017; Bayfield 2023). Echoing the findings of Bayfield (2023), a minority of participants in this study spoke about kind and supportive teachers who had encouraged a sense of belief and confidence in their academic achievements. This had played an important role in nurturing their positive learning identities and in turn their aspirations and expectations for HE as illustrated by Sophie:

I didn't get like love from my mum so it felt like love from teachers, so I knew that if I did well in school teachers would praise me and then I would feel happy and I think it just stuck with me and then like, and I think quite rationally and I want to do well in my future and continue to be this way so I can have a good future and I look at my parents and I don't want to be like that. I want to have a better life than them so I just stuck with it (Sophie, student).

The positive learning identities expressed by these participants is pertinent given that most of the participants reported highly disrupted school experiences. Many had moved school multiple times during their childhood and adolescence and had negative experiences of school, which was invariably related to a range of factors including their challenging behaviour or mental health needs. Consequently, whilst a minority of participants had done very well academically and had completed compulsory schooling with high levels of

academic attainment and had positive orientations to formal education, several participants had left school with few or low academic qualifications and did not hold positive learning identities. For these participants, other factors featured prominently in their decisions and transitions to HE, as discussed in the following section.

4.2. University as the ‘only option’ and a route to a positive future.

For a minority of participants, their motivations to embark on HE were driven by their sense that university was the only possible option upon leaving care and full-time post-compulsory education. Whilst this narrative was present in a minority of participants’ interviews, it is nonetheless important as it highlights the ways in which decisions about HE are framed by complex intersections of agentic decisions, informed by an enjoyment of learning and a desire to pursue particular subjects, and structural constraints which define the range of options available to young people upon leaving care. For these care-experienced students and graduates, their decisions were heavily informed by considerations of their living situations. Robin’s account is a pertinent example of this. For Robin, going to university was regarded as the only option given that she had no other options for accommodation upon leaving care:

*In all honesty, I felt like university was the only option and that was one reason why I went to university in the first place was because I felt as though I didn’t have anywhere to like live. So getting away and doing my own thing was the only way I was able to grow and able to be who I wanted to be. That was the reasoning for why I went to university. I’ve always been quite academic and I love to learn and stuff like that so I’ve had the desire to go but when I got to 18 and when I was applying through UCAS, it was like this was the only option I have so I was like I kind of need to get to university.
(Robin graduate)*

Robin’s excerpt exemplified the ways in which both agency and structural constraints intersected to inform her decisions about participating in HE. Robin had a positive academic identity and loved learning. Together with her interest in theatre and drama, this had informed her choice of an Arts course at university. Yet her decision to embark on university was also informed by the material and economic necessity of needing somewhere to live on leaving care. Robin’s experience evokes the notion of accelerated transitions to adulthood that are routinely experienced by care leavers (Adley and Jupp Kina 2014; Waugh et al., 2023). For Robin, her lack of wider social connections and material and economic resources meant that she neither had the luxury of being able to live at ‘home’ so she could consider alternative options or delay the transition to HE.⁴ Nor

⁴ Governments in England and Wales have adopted policies aimed at supporting young people leaving care. In 2015, the Welsh Government established the ‘When I’m ready’ scheme which provides care leavers the opportunity to remain with their foster carers after they have officially left care at the age of 18.

did she have an extensive network of people who might provide her with ‘bridges’ to resources or opportunities for pursuing alternative options.

For five participants, their experiences of significant adversities and challenges during their childhood and adolescence and time ‘in-care’ had led them to aspire for a different life to the one they had experienced. In this context, HE was regarded as a route to improved circumstances. This illustrates both participants’ determination to embark on HE and the internalisation of wider popular and policy narratives around the economic benefits of HE (Milburn 2012). Elin’s excerpt exemplifies how HE was viewed as a way to improve her situation:

When I was a teenager, first going into care, it was really really terrible, being removed from all my family. When I was in year 8, I used to come home from school every day and sit in my room and go on my phone. It was really just a depressing time and my motivation to improve my situation came from that as well, it was a lot about desperation. I knew that things weren’t going to get better and I think unless I personally did stuff. (Elin, student)

Other participants also expressed similar views when asked about their reason for going to university:

Yeah, I guess, knowing that your only way out was education, only way out of the system is education because at 18 your put on income support, you’re put on housing benefit and it’s just that cycle isn’t it (Rebecca, graduate).

For a small number of the participants, their decision to embark on HE was driven by a desire to enter a field of employment connected to their childhood and adolescent experiences. These participants tended to emphasise that they wanted to embark on a specific course at university in order to pursue a field of work where they could potentially ‘make a change’ through their future professional practice. These participants were currently undertaking studies in programmes related to social work, criminal youth justice or education. This finding echoes Mannay et al., (2015) and Stevenson et al. (2020) who found that that care leavers are often motivated by their own experiences to enter caring professions, and as such have a higher propensity to enter post-graduate employment related to social work or residential care (Harrison, Baker and Stevenson 2022). Indeed, amongst some of the participants in this study, there was a strong sense that their own past experiences of the social care system had played a role in their decisions about their

A similar scheme is available in England called ‘Staying put.’ For some participants in this research, this scheme was not used where they had left care before the age of 18, or where relationships were strained or fractured with former foster carers.

programme of study. Rebecca, who was doing a Masters degree in social work, was a pertinent example of this:

I don't think I'd be doing social work if I hadn't grown up in care because the whole reason I wanted to do social work is because, with all the stuff I'm volunteering for it's to make a change, and so I was like I'll do social work to make a change (Rebecca, graduate)

It was clear therefore that transitions to university for care-experienced young people are informed by a complex range of factors, including positive learning identities, a passion to pursue a particular interest or subject and a desire to 'make a change' in a particular professional field. For some, it was also driven by a sense that university was the 'only option' following post-compulsory education given a lack of material and economic resources and social networks which might render alternative options accessible. For others, the motivation to embark on HE was driven by a desire to live a different kind of life to the one they had experienced so far. In this sense, going to university was at once a positive choice, an opportunity to further develop their academic identity and pursue personal interests, but it was also a decision made within the boundaries of options which had been heavily constrained by the limits of material, social and cultural resources.

4.3. Social and cultural contexts: Cultural and social capitals.

Extensive research has indicated that young people's decision about HE are framed by their wider social contexts, including familial knowledge and experience of HE (Reay et al., 2001; Ball et al., 2002). These wider social contexts orientate young people's thoughts and feelings about university (Ball et al., 2002). For a minority of the participants in this research, however, it was not so much familial experiences of HE that cultivated their own feelings and orientations towards it, but people in their wider social networks. A small number of participants in this study had foster parents who had been to university or had foster carers' whose children had been to university, thus providing indirect access to cultural knowledge and experience of HE on which they could draw. Caitlyn had several relatives with university experience and therefore had access to knowledge of HE which was crucial in informing her own transition to HE. She described how her aunty and uncle, who were only a few years older than her, were influential in her decision to go to university. She was also encouraged by her grandmother:

They [extended family] just expected that that was what I would do anyway [go to university]. It wasn't like I got any extra help or anything. At that point, it just seemed like the thing to do in my family. I wasn't from one of these families where I was the first one to go to university. It wasn't a big thing. It was just something that we all did (Caitlyn, graduate).

For most of the students and graduates who took part in this research, however, neither their foster parents, nor anybody in their immediate biological families had been to university. In the absence of familial knowledge and experience of HE, access to dominant forms of capitals and resources had, for some, been achieved through fortuitous or serendipitous encounters or interactions with people who possessed such capitals. Elin's experiences exemplify this; she was exceptional amongst the participants in that she had won a scholarship to attend a private boarding school to do her A-levels. Once there, she had been able to mobilise the school's social capital, including their networks with people who had direct experience of the university course she was applying to. Through these links, she was provided with intense tutoring and mentoring for the university application process:

So the support that I had through that process [applying to university], that was down to the school [the private boarding school she attended], they found a mentor for me, someone who had done this [course] in the college that I was going to.... That person really really helped me. They built up to the entrance exam, and they did help me with my personal statement and they helped me with the entrance exam (Elin student).

The social networks she leveraged at the boarding school she attended ultimately enabled her to successfully apply and gain access to an elite university. For Elin, her transition to HE was thus facilitated by both her strong academic attainment and positive learner identity, but also by the cultural and social capital on which she could draw. Indeed, a small number of participants also gained access to social networks and resources which facilitated their transitions to HE. Sophie described how her boyfriend's stepmother was a social worker and had provided important support in applying to university:

My boyfriend's step-mum is a social worker so she would actually go through a lot of it with me [the university application] and my boyfriends' family are the ones who helped me, also pushed me to go to [named] university because I was like, freaking out about it so they were encouraging me to go there...(Sophie, student)

Here, Sophie's access to 'significant adults' (Archer et al., 2023) with knowledge and experience of HE played an important role in her application to and offer of a place at university. Like most of the participants in this study, Sophie was the first in her family to go to university and in the absence of familial knowledge and experience of HE she mobilised dominant forms of capitals through her wider social networks. These social networks played an important role in their transitions to university.

5. Findings 2: What are the mechanisms underpinning care-experienced students' successful completion of their studies at university?

5.1. Material, emotional and social support

As discussed in the previous section, the extent to which participants could mobilise social and cultural capitals and resources was important in their transitions to HE. These wider social-cultural contexts were also important in facilitating participants' successful completion of their studies. Particularly important was having access to key adults who provided emotional support whilst at university. A minority of participants turned to their former foster carers for emotional support at times of crisis whilst at university. For example, Tara was able to draw upon emotional support from her foster carers whilst studying for her undergraduate degree:

Researcher: So would you say that your foster carers were your emotional support at university?

Tara: Yes, absolutely 100%. They were very much my emotional support. Like I am in contact with my actual birth family but in terms of emotional support, I rely much more heavily on my foster parents. ...Like having that stability and like having that security, has kind of made university a smoother ride than perhaps someone who didn't have that. (Tara, graduate)

Tara was exceptional amongst the participants in this study in that she was one of a couple who reported having highly positive and supportive relationships with her foster carers. Tara had lived with the same foster carers for 14 years, and whilst studying for her undergraduate degree, would return to their home during the university holidays. The emotional and material support she received from her foster carers (including accommodation during the holidays) was crucial to her enjoyment of university and her capacity to complete her studies. This arrangement provided her with a sense of emotional and physical security and consistency that she needed to both complete her studies and to be able to go on to post-graduate study⁵.

More commonly, however, the participants did not mention foster carers as being the key providers of emotional and social support whilst at university. Instead, they tended to refer to friends or girlfriends/boyfriends, and for some, lecturers or tutors at university as being

⁵ Tara had been in a 'when I'm ready' placement since leaving care at aged 18. This arrangement allowed Tara to continue living with foster carers during the university holidays throughout her undergraduate and post-graduate study.

significant sources of emotional support. Having supportive and caring relationships with key adults emerged as crucial in enabling participants to successfully complete their studies, reflecting wider research which has highlighted the importance of supportive relationships in care-experienced students' experiences of HE (Cotton et al., 2017):

I had a really good relationship with one of my film lecturers. But emotionally I had, there wasn't that much support [at university], so I built a relationship with one of my film lecturers and she literally was there if ever I had sort of issues or struggles (Robin, graduate)

It was clear that supportive and caring relationships with key adults played an important role in fostering students' sense of belonging to university and their overall engagement with and enjoyment of their studies, enabling them to complete their courses.

Where key adults who provided empathy, sensitivity, support and care played a positive role in participants' enjoyment of their course and in their likelihood of completing their studies, by the same measure, when emotionally supportive and caring relationships were considered inadequate, this had a detrimental impact on participants' experiences of university. Indeed, where emotionally supportive relationships had broken down for participants, the impact on their engagement in their studies was substantial. One participant had recently dropped out of university because her relationship with her boyfriend, who had been her most significant source of emotional support, had ended. Without his support, continuing at university was experienced as untenable. Similarly, where key adults with whom students interacted (such as university tutors or lecturers) were felt to be lacking in their empathy, care, kindness and support at times of need or crisis, this had a particularly damaging impact on students' mental health and thus their enjoyment and engagement in their studies. This is important given that care-experienced young people have a higher rate of mental health needs than non-care-experienced students (Harrison 2017). As such, the lack of empathy, care and support shown by university staff members can have particularly damaging repercussions for engagement and retention amongst these students.

5.2. Self-determination, drive and resilience

A final important theme to emerge from the data was defined by participants' reflections on their own determination, drive and resilience. During the interviews, participants were asked to describe what, in their view, explains their successful transition to university and, amongst the graduates, successful completion of their courses. Echoing Cotton et al. (2017) and Ellis and Johnston (2022), these participants often framed their success in terms of their own high level of intrinsic motivation and resilience and referred to

themselves as their biggest champions. A narrative of drive and determination was particularly pertinent in Laura's account:

*Laura: It's down to me, it's down to me. I think that, very much I can't explain, people often comment on my resilience and my ability to sort of overcome and not let things affect me and impact on me and still be able to carry on and doing really well and all the rest of it, I do not know where that resilience came from. Even though my husband has been here and supportive, actually it's not that that's got me through it, it's myself, it's my own drive, it's my own will to want to do better and it's not something...I think when you're a young person living in care and as little as any achievement means a lot. These massive ones where you're overcoming, it means so much more than everyone else. That is massively important to me, that drives me.
(Laura, student)*

Identifying exactly where the self-determination and drive shown by participants came from is challenging; at once, their unwavering desire to live a different life and their assumption that HE would lead to this could help explain this. However, such individualising explanations for their success fails to recognise the wider social contexts in which resilience flourishes. Whilst these participants may have emphasised their own inner drive and determination, it was clear that external factors also played a part in this. As indicated, the presence of key adults who provided social and emotional support was crucial to students' engagement with their studies and capacity to stick the course. The centrality of supportive relationships was indicated in the challenges participants faced when supportive relationships broke down or were perceived to be inadequate. Also important was the availability of material support, as reflected in Tara's account of being able to return to her foster carer's home during the holidays and the security this provided.

A small number of the professionals who were interviewed also expressed the view that resilience helps explain why some students are successful at university. The following excerpts capture the sense that individual traits such as resilience helps explain the success of some care experienced students in HE:

It's difficult isn't it. Resilience to the challenges that students face, that's definitely one of them. There are lots of resources in the university to help support students who might be feeling overwhelmed. Especially from a work-load point of view (Professional, HEI).

Yeah, it's tricky. I think, again, not scientific, but for some of them there is just something in them that actually makes them that bit more resilient and that bit more determined to fight a path through. (Professional)

This contention that success at university reflects individual traits such as resilience echoes wider societal narratives which emphasise meritocratic explanations for success. Whilst the student and graduate participants overwhelmingly expressed the idea that resilience and self-determination was the driving force behind their academic success, participants were not unanimous in this view. Elin was critical of the notion that her success could be explained wholly in terms of her own inner drive and determination. Whilst she recognised personal drive and self-determination as being an important part of this, she also presents a critique of the individualising assumptions inherent in the concept of resilience. She recognised that structural barriers exert their effects on young people like her, and acknowledged the luck she had experienced in her transitions to HE:

My carers weren't supportive of me in any way so I can't say that it was down to other people but at the same time, I can't say it was down to myself either, I would say I had a lot of luck. These opportunities that came along, I could have just not used them. I would say the majority is just down to me because I haven't had a consistent academic or emotional support through everything and that resilience just comes from my life experience. People say resilience, but sometimes resilience, you have to be resilient, it's just like survival (Elin, student).

Here, Elin acknowledges both the luck and opportunities that have come her way but also the determination and resilience she had shown. Even when she mentions her own resilience, she offers a critique of this, emphasising that what often appears as resilience is masking a less positive existence, survival. This highlights the challenges with the concept of resilience (Ellis and Johnston 2022; Hutcheon & Lashewicz, 2014), highlighting the way in which resilience may be directing attention away from a less optimistic experience, survival.

6. Findings 3. What are care-experienced students and graduates' views on university provision for care-experienced students?

6.1. Welsh universities' provision for care experienced students.

In recent decades, care experienced students have been identified as an underrepresented group in HE and have been a key focus of widening participation policy in England and Wales (HEFCW 2021; HEFCE 2008). As a result, universities in England and Wales now provide a range of resources and mechanisms for supporting care-experienced students in HE. The scoping review of Welsh university websites and interviews with professionals revealed both commonalities in the range of resources and support mechanisms Welsh universities provide for care experienced students, as well as several differences. The resources universities provide range from financial and practical support packages including bursaries, year-round accommodation and accommodation starter packs (such as the provision of crockery or bedding in student halls), to programmes or schemes designed to support students' engagement in the social aspect of university life. The scoping review revealed that all universities in Wales provide financial support for 'care leavers'⁶ typically in the form of a care leaver bursary of between £1,500-£1,000 per academic year for full-time student care leavers. When the review was undertaken, the bursary was available to all students who disclose as a 'care leaver' and six universities in Wales ring-fenced this support for students who are 25 years old or under when they start their course⁷.

All universities in Wales also provide access to year-round accommodation for care experienced students. This provision was reflected in the interviews with professionals, a minority of whom highlighted the availability of year-round accommodation at their institution as being an important aspect of their support:

There's 52 weeks access to accommodation, which is good because over the summer they don't necessarily have anywhere else to go so it's nice that they can stay on (Professional).

⁶ At the time of the research, universities in Wales directed their provision of financial support such as the 'care leaver bursary' to students who are officially recognised as 'care leavers' rather than to all care experienced students.

⁷ Practice varied in terms of applying the 25-year-old cut off. Two universities in Wales did not clearly state the eligibility criteria on their websites.

Whilst the provision of accommodation throughout the year was common practice across universities, according to a small number of participants, some universities require students to move accommodation to different flats during university holidays.

Besides these commonalities, there was also variation across universities in terms of their support. Strikingly, whilst most university websites claimed to provide a 'named contact' for care leavers, there was variation amongst them in the extent to which the name and contact details of this person was provided on the websites, and in the roles, responsibilities and strategic position of this person in the university. Where a name and contact email address was provided, this person was invariably located in student finance, widening participation or access, or student inclusion. In some universities, they are called the dedicated 'care leaver or care experienced student' contact, in others, they are referred to as the care leaver contact, but their exact title might be financial advisor. These variations may reflect institutional differences in funding allocation to these roles and in approaches to widening access and participation and hence the strategic location of the care leaver contact in terms of this. Universities also varied in the range of informal mechanisms of support provided for care leavers. According to the websites and discussions with professionals, six universities provided informal social activities such as coffee and chat sessions, mentoring schemes or social events for care leavers. These activities were invariably designed to support students to engage in the social element of university.

There were also inconsistencies between universities in the extent to which they provide care leavers with support upon graduation; one university provided students access to university accommodation between the period following graduation up until September of the same year. The intention of this arrangement is to allow students time to find suitable accommodation and employment after graduating. Four universities provided a financial support package for graduation costs such as gown hire or photos. There was no mention of such support at the remaining four university websites. One university offers care leaver graduates membership to a scheme which provides bespoke counselling, mental health support and financial advice for care leavers up to a year after graduations. At the time of interview, a professional at another university mentioned that they were applying to get university membership of this scheme. Five universities also provided students with support for employability and work experience, and a small number of these had schemes designed to support entry into employment which were targeted at particular groups such as care leavers.

These variations in institutional provision may reflect differences in the extent to which information was visible on university websites, and the extent to which the professionals who were interviewed were aware of such provision at their university. For example, the

provision of employability support upon graduation may have fallen under the remit of an institutional employability service or team. Therefore, when asked about the provision of such support, the professional interviewed may not have been aware of such provision at their institution because it was located in a different area of the university. Nevertheless, these variations indicate substantial differences in the outward facing visibility of support for care leavers. These variations were reflected in the students and graduates' views on university support, as will be discussed below.

6.2. Students and graduates' views on institutional support for care-experienced students.

An important area of exploration for the project was participants' views on institutional mechanisms of support, including their views regarding what is working well and challenges, limitations or areas for development in the way that universities provide support for care-experienced students. The students and graduates were varied both in terms of the extent to which they drew upon university provision for care leavers and the extent to which they were aware that such provision existed at their university. A minority of the participants in the study said that they made use of the financial support offered by their university but did not feel that they needed or wanted other forms of support. A small number used aspects of support such as year-round accommodation and university starter packs (such as bedding or crockery upon arrival in halls). A minority of participants were unaware that their university provided any sort of support for care leavers. The variations amongst participants in the extent to which they were aware of institutional support for care leavers partly reflected the participants' age. Where participants were over the age of 25, they may not have been eligible for the care leavers' bursary if their university applied a 25-year-old cut-off. These participants were more likely to be undertaking post-graduate study at the time of interview (though two participants who were over the age of 25 were studying under-graduate courses). However, participants' age does not fully explain the variation amongst participants in their awareness of university support; some of the 'mature' students who took part in the research recalled having little information or knowledge about any support for care leavers provided by their university, whilst others were aware of this support. Also, one student, who was studying a Masters programme recalled having support and contact from the care leaver support person at their current university, but recalled having little support when they were an undergraduate student at another university, indicating that level of study (i.e. under-graduate versus post-graduate) does not explain the variation in participants' views. Thus, the variations between participants reflected institutional differences in the kinds of support provided and crucially, how visible and accessible it was made to students.

6.3. What is working well in terms of university support: Student and graduates' perspectives?

When asked what they felt was useful about the support they received from their universities, most student and graduate participants who were below the age of 25, said that the financial support they received from their universities was useful:

Yeah, I agree that having targeted funding for care leavers or estranged students has been really useful for me, because it's just been kind of, they're available to apply for. So yeah, that's basically funded my living costs to allow me to live in, in the university all year round (Elin, student).

However, they did not view this financial support uncritically. As described above, several universities in Wales used a 25-year-old cut off for the financial support offered to 'care leavers' which a minority of participants regarded as problematic⁸:

To be honest, I think they should fund... they should do a bursary for any age of care leavers, because at any age, if you're going to university as a care leaver, it's exceptional. You're beating the stereotype, you're beating the statistics, aren't you? I'm four times more likely to go to jail than I am to university. So, I deserve a thousand pounds a year thank you. (Marie, student)

The students and graduates highlighted other areas of support as valuable, including the following:

- Participants said that it was useful to be able to live in student accommodation all year round. This was felt to be particularly important because of limited opportunity to engage in part-time employment and also having no other place to stay during vacation.
- One participant said they received practical support such as kitchen or bedroom starter packs (crockery, bedding) upon arrival in halls and felt this to be useful.
- A minority of participants said that the provision of support in their university had been 'very visible' and this was regarded as valuable as it meant they did not have to search for it.
- A minority of participants said that having a key named person who reaches out to care-experienced students to inform them of the support they can access (including financial, emotional, pastoral, accommodation) was useful.

⁸ Whilst capping financial support for 'care leavers' at aged 25 is not a national policy, this was practice at several universities and a small number of participants were aware of this practice.

- One participant said support for the Open Day was good. This participant said that a named person met them at the Open Day and accommodation was provided during the Open Day which allowed her to make the long journey to visit the university.
- One participant valued receiving a 'check-ins' on mother and father's day, in recognition of the ambiguous loss of being care experienced.

The following section highlights where the support provided by participants' universities was deemed inadequate.

6.4. Students and graduates' views on where improvements could be made?

The students and graduates were asked 'Where, if any, could improvements be made in terms of the support provided by universities for care-experienced students?' Perhaps one of the most striking findings was that these participants tended to emphasise that the provision of social and emotional support by universities was inadequate or insufficient. This was a pertinent theme, expressed by several participants. Given the importance of emotionally supportive and caring relationships to participants' engagement with their studies and enjoyment of university, where social and emotional support was felt to be inadequate, the implications of this were felt particularly sharply amongst participants. There was an important contradiction in the research; on the one hand, good quality caring, empathetic and supportive relationships were crucial in care-experienced students' engagement and enjoyment of university. On the other hand, the provision of quality social and emotional support by the university was deemed to be inadequate. This echoes research which has highlighted the importance of social and emotional support in young people's transitions from care to independence (Adley and Jupp Kina 2014). The following excerpt reflects this lack of emotional and social support and the need for more opportunities for gaining informal social and emotional support:

I think a therapist is great. Sometimes as a foster child you get tired of that. It's okay if they have a therapeutic background, but I think just somebody in the university at least once a month checking in with whatever foster child is in that uni saying, "Hey, are you okay? Do you want to come out for a chat?". Maybe not that they could help in any way, but just being open ears because I think it's more of an open ears thing I personally would think is needed.... I think massively, having some sort of body to talk to that isn't a therapist. It's not ruling out if they have a therapeutic background. That's fine, but I think even if it's just a quick text message saying, "Hi, how are you doing today?" or, "How is this going?" (Keira, student)

The provision of informal mechanisms of social and emotional support was deemed particularly important amongst participants but inadequate. Several students and graduates said that having a person to talk to, who is not a counsellor or a member of staff

in a senior academic position, would be useful. They felt that this was important so that personal or academic issues could be dealt with early thus preventing them from being escalated to higher levels. There was a sense here that greater provision of informal support would mimic the informal mechanisms of support that more traditional students might access through their wider networks, namely family, which care-experienced students tend to have limited access to. Participants also emphasised that there should be consistency in the pastoral support provided, suggesting that it should be the same named person who students can turn to for pastoral support throughout their degree. One participant felt that the person who students can turn to for pastoral support, should not be a member of staff who is involved with the student academically.

This emphasis on the provision of informal mechanisms of social support for care experienced students was also emphasised by a minority of professionals. In response to a question about where they felt improvements could be made in terms of the provision of support for care experienced students in their university the follow professional stated:

I think setting up support groups would be good because I think having somebody they could maybe relate to would be good idea. (Professional)

Other areas where students and graduates felt that improvements could be made in support for care-experienced students included the following:

- Staff members who have any interaction with students should have training to develop their knowledge and understanding of what it means to be care-experienced, as well as more general training in mental health.
- Support for care-experienced students needs to be highly visible and easily accessible in universities.
- When students disclose their status as care-experienced, a named member of staff should reach out to them to ‘check-in’ with them and to ensure that they are getting the right support. This would address the lack of ‘hidden support’ (through family and social networks) that many students draw upon, but which care-experienced students seldom have.
- Access to sufficient and good quality mental health support and counselling is important.
- Not having to disclose their status as care-experienced, or divulge personal issues, to multiple different people.
- The availability of stable accommodation throughout their time at university is useful but students should not be asked to move accommodation during the holidays. This insight was provided by one participant who reported that they had to

move into different accommodation during the holidays as was the policy of their university.

- More support (financially and practically) upon graduation. It would be useful to have a 'buffer' of support for students when they graduate including support for finding and securing accommodation and employment several months after graduation.

7. Findings 4. What are the barriers and facilitators to students' transitions to employment and education opportunities upon graduation?

All of the seven graduates who took part in this research had completed their undergraduate degrees up to four years previously. Amongst the graduates, four were doing post-graduate study, two were in full-time employment and one was employed whilst undertaking an internship. In many ways, the mechanisms which supported participants' successful entry to university and completion of their studies mirror those which support their successful transitions to employment or post-graduate education following graduation. As discussed above, these included having key adults who provide emotional and social support during their time at university; having access to material and practical support (such as accommodation during university holidays) and having a positive learning identity and a passion and drive for a particular area of study. The importance of emotional, practical and material support was exemplified by Tara, whose transitions from under-graduate study to a post-graduate course (Masters) was greatly supported by the material and emotional security and support provided by her foster carers. She described how, having the security of accommodation provided by her foster carers was crucial in enabling her to complete her degree and go on to study a Masters:

Being here (referring to her current placement, where she is currently staying during the Easter holidays) really helped because I didn't have to worry about being in my own accommodation just yet. I understand that universities provide accommodation for care leavers, I remember reading about it when I was in [university] but being here also very much helped because I felt secure. If I needed a base...like if I was told, your placement is coming to an end, you need to find your own accommodation, I may have perhaps not wanted to do something was, as, obviously you get a student loan but you're putting a lot of trust into...I might have wanted to get a job that would pay me immediately. I could still pursue studies, rather than worrying about bills to pay... I had that security to pursue studies (Tara, graduate)

Besides the provision of accommodation and emotional and social support, other mechanisms were important in enabling participants to make transitions to employment or post-graduate study upon completion of their degrees. Connections with adults who had knowledge or information about opportunities for work or post-graduate study had played an important role in the post-graduation transitions of a small number of participants. Olivia's experiences were a pertinent example of this. She had secured an internship during the final months of her undergraduate degree, which subsequently led to a job at the same place. Her connection with the 'care experienced student contact' at her university was crucial in securing this internship and her subsequent employment. Whilst

this theme was expressed by a minority of participants it is nevertheless important. It illustrates the crucial role of social capital in connecting care-experienced students to post-graduation opportunities. This participant's experiences illustrate the ways in which social connections characterised by 'weak ties' (Granovetta 1973) between socially heterogeneous individuals can provide a mechanism for accessing resources, information or opportunities which might not otherwise be gained⁹.

⁹ Follow up interviews with the graduates (forthcoming) hope to explore this theme further. These interviews will examine the extent to which social networks and social capital are mobilised in graduates' access to opportunities upon graduation.

8. Conclusions

Care-experienced students remain one of the most under-represented groups in higher education. The educational challenges they face prior to embarking on university are substantial and are routinely reflected in delayed, disrupted or fractured transitions to higher education (Jackson and Cameron 2012; Driscoll 2013; Harrison 2017; Brady and Gilligan 2019). The aspirations of care-experienced young people are comparable to non-care-experienced peers (Mannay et al., 2017), indicating that the barriers to HE are structural and systematic, rather than reflecting individual shortcomings (Bayfield 2023). Despite the barriers and challenges faced, a minority of care-experienced young people embark on HE, complete their degrees, and make successful transitions from undergraduate study to a range of opportunities after graduation. This research sought to identify the mechanisms which support care-experienced students' transitions to university, their experiences of it, and their successful completion of their studies. Amongst the graduates, it sought to understand the mechanisms which supported their transitions to opportunities after graduation. It also illuminated care-experienced students and graduates' views on the support provided by universities for care-experienced students.

Care-experienced young people's transitions to university are greatly enabled by positive experiences of education, strong academic attainment and positive learning identities at early stages of formal education. Supportive and encouraging relationships with key adults (including teachers and foster carers) are also important in fostering young people's positive learning identities and their expectations and aspirations for HE. The wider social contexts in which care-experienced young people are embedded, including their social networks, is also important in their transitions to HE. Family and relatives routinely provide an important cultural context in which expectations around HE participation are cultivated for more traditional students, (Ball et al., 2002). For care-experienced young people, who may have strained relationships with family or relatives, their wider social networks, including their connections with key adults or professionals who have knowledge or experience of HE, are important in cultivating general expectations about participating in university (see Brady and Gilligan 2019).

Supportive and encouraging adults are not only important in care-experienced people's transitions to university, but also in their engagement and enjoyment of their studies. Foster carers, friends, partners and university staff who provide support, care, empathy and encouragement during times of crisis, are crucial to care-experienced students' positive experiences of university. By the same measure, a lack of supportive, caring and empathetic relationships with key adults during students' time at university can have detrimental impacts on their engagement in university. For some of the participants in this

study, the implications of this were so significant that they resulted in withdrawal from university. These insights remind us of the power of emotionally supportive relationships, characterised by empathy and care at university, in student's engagement and retention in HE.

Whilst social and emotional support was crucial in fostering students' enjoyment and engagement with their studies, the availability of financial and practical support at university is also important to care-experienced students' capacity to engage with and complete their studies. Financial support in the form of bursaries or funding for accommodation is crucial in enabling students to fully engage in their studies; access to accommodation which is stable and consistent throughout the duration of their studies is important in giving students a sense of material security. Universities should be mindful of the damaging repercussions of relocating students to other accommodation sites during holidays, given the impact this can have on students' wellbeing.

Relationships with adults are not only important sources of emotional support. Connections with adults with knowledge or information about opportunities after graduation can be invaluable for enabling care-experienced students to gain access to opportunities, resources and information which might be useful following graduation. Here, social capital operated as a resource; it connected graduates to opportunities they might not otherwise have gained access to which can be leveraged to access opportunities for employment or further study.

8.1 Future directions for the research

In November 2023, an advisory group was established consisting of professionals working in a range of organisations or settings both in and beyond HE. Members of the group included professionals working in student services or widening participation, directors of charities and academics, including lecturers and researchers. All members of the advisory group have experience of either working directly with or researching care experienced young people, and/or they have a wider interest in issues pertaining to widening participation or inclusion in higher education. The purpose of the advisory group is to explore the ways in which the findings of this study can be taken forward by HEIs in Wales to create change for the future. The expertise and interests of the advisory group will be invaluable for exploring potential knowledge gaps that could be addressed with future research on care experienced students in HE.

This study will be extended through a longitudinal research dimension. This will involve examining the longer-term trajectories of the students and graduates who have taken part in this research. All participants who have taken part in the research will be contacted between April-June 2024, inviting them to take part in a second interview in which a

number of themes will be explored. In the graduate sample, attention will be placed on their experiences of navigating transitions to and through work or study following graduation. Particular attention will be placed on the role of their wider social networks in supporting their transitions through post-graduation opportunities. For the student sample, the follow up interviews will explore their ongoing experiences of HE and aspirations for life after undergraduate study. This longitudinal arm of the study is crucial for gaining an understanding of the extent to which the longer-term trajectories are inflected by nuances in access to a range of social, economic and cultural resources.

9. Recommendations

9.1 Recommendations for schools and colleges in England and Wales

- 1) Teachers in schools should be provided with bespoke training to enable them to support the educational outcomes and transitions of care-experienced young people. Developing teachers' knowledge and understanding regarding the challenges faced by care-experienced young people and how such challenges might impact on their educational experiences, outcomes and aspirations for HE is important. Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes in England and Wales would benefit from more bespoke training and support around the important role teachers can play in care experienced children's lives and educational aspirations more generally.
- 2) Schools and colleges should provide opportunities for care-experienced pupils to gain contact with people with direct knowledge, information and experience of higher education and the university application process. These people can provide bespoke mentoring, information, and advice regarding applying to university.

9.2. Recommendations for universities and HE providers

- 1) HEIs should financially invest in the provision of staff who are the 'named contacts' for care-experienced students. As discussed above, this practice was already established at several universities in Wales. However, there were inconsistencies in the visibility of this person and in their roles and responsibilities. A key named person should be available in all universities and these people should have bespoke responsibility for the pastoral needs of students and should be visible, accessible and contactable to them. This person should periodically 'check-in' with students to gain updates on their wellbeing, provide advice, guidance and information, as well as pastoral support.
- 2) The 'named contacts' for care experienced students in HEIs should have adequate training on supporting students social and emotional needs. These people would need a high level of empathy and understanding towards the needs of care experienced students.
- 3) Universities should provide students opportunities to develop informal social networks and friendships with peers. As noted above, there was considerable variation across universities in Wales in the provision of such activities, with some providing extensive activities to foster students' social networks and others

providing little or no support in this area. The provision of informal mechanisms of developing students' social networks and friendships should be common across all HEIs. Social activities could include 'café' style drop-ins, buddying or mentoring schemes¹⁰ where opportunities are provided for students to come together and meet in informal relaxed environments.

- 4) Care experienced students should be provided with more accessible and good quality mental health and counselling support. This support should be adequate in length and free at the point of access to all students who disclose as 'care experienced'.
- 5) Training should be provided for all members of university staff who have interactions with care-experienced students in order to develop their understanding about the impact of being care experienced on students' lives including their mental health, academic achievement and their experiences of university more generally.
- 6) Students should have access to stable and secure accommodation throughout their under-graduate and post-graduate study and should not be required to re-locate during university holidays. As stated above, it is common practice in Wales for universities to provide year-round accommodation. However, the requirement of students to move accommodation during university holidays (which happens in some universities) should be removed.
- 7) Financial support for care experienced students should not be capped at 25 but be extended to include any care-experienced person in HE.
- 8) Universities should provide a 'buffer' of support for care-experienced graduates in the form of support for securing accommodation and employment in the first six months following completion of under-graduate studies. The provision of dedicated staff members whose responsibilities lie with organising and managing this would be crucial.
- 9) There should be consistency across the HE sectors in England and Wales in terms of the provision, accessibility and visibility of support for care experienced students. HEIs should look to universities who are sector leading in terms of the range, visibility and accessibility of support for care experienced students.

¹⁰ There were examples of activities specifically targeted at care experienced students already taking place in a minority of universities.

9.3. Recommendations for fostering charities and organisations¹¹

- 1) Extensive support, training and guidance should be provided for foster carers, and any other adults working directly with children in care to equip them with the skills and knowledge needed to play an active role in supporting young people's educational engagement and transitions to HE.
- 2) Professionals who work with care experienced young people including social workers, personal advisors and foster carers should have training to ensure they support them appropriately with their emotional and practical support needs in related to education.

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Annex A: Participant information sheet sample

Participant information sheet

From students to graduates: Examining the post-graduation transitions of care experienced students

You are being invited to take part in some research. Before you decide whether to participate, it is important for you to understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the research?

My name is Ceryn Evans and I am carrying out research on care experienced students' and graduates' views of university. If you are a current university student, I'm interested in finding out about your experiences of university and your hopes and plans for when you graduate. If you are graduate, I'm interested in finding out about your time at university, what you are doing now that you have graduated and your plans for the future. I would like to invite you to take part in the research because you have experience of care and you are a university student or recent graduate.

What happens if I agree to take part?

If you decide to take part, you will be invited to take part in an interview which will take roughly 45-60 minutes. The interview will be conducted at a time convenient with you and will be face to face or online, whichever you prefer and whichever is most convenient. The interview will be carried out by myself (Ceryn Evans).

If you agree to participate, I'd like to take your contact details (i.e. a phone number and/or email address) so that I can keep in contact with you to invite you to take part in a second interview which will take place roughly six months after the first interview. In this second interview, you'll be asked about what you are doing now (i.e. since finishing your degree) and your experiences of the transition from student to graduate.

Are there any risks associated with taking part?

There are no anticipated risks associated with taking part in the research. However, during the interview we may discuss topics that are associated with your care experiences. If you feel any discomfort with any of the questions asked of you, you don't have to answer them. You can ask me any questions and inform me if you find my questions difficult to answer.

Data Protection and Confidentiality

Your data will be processed in accordance with the Data Protection Act 2018 and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). All information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential. Your data will only be viewed by the researcher/research team. All electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer file on Swansea University laptop or PC. Notes will be taken anonymously and will not include personal or sensitive information such as name, gender, ethnicity.

Ceryn Evans will take responsibility for data destruction, and all collected identifiable data will be destroyed once the study is published. The researchers will abide by local data protection laws when collecting personal data.

What will happen to the information I provide?

The findings from this project will be stored on a password protected University laptop or PC, in a password protected folder, and any notes during the interviews will not include your names or personal data. This research has been approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee at Swansea University. Ceryn Evans is a lecturer in the Department of Education & Childhood Studies, Swansea University.

The information you provide in the interviews will inform a report which will be written at the end of the project. It may also be written about in academic journals where other people who are interested in this research can learn about and may be discussed at conferences or other platforms where people interested in the research may be present. All information presented in any reports or publications will be anonymous and every effort will be made to ensure that you are not identifiable.

Is participation voluntary and what if I wish to later withdraw?

Your participation is entirely voluntary – you do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate but later wish to withdraw from the study, you are free to withdraw without giving a reason and without penalty. Please note that the data I collect will be made anonymous within two days of the interview taking place. Thus, it will not be possible to identify and remove your data at a later date, should you decide to withdraw from the study. Therefore, if at the end of the interview, if you decide to withdraw your data, please let me know within two days of the interview.

Data Protection Privacy Notice

The data controller for this project will be Swansea University. The University Data Protection Officer provides oversight of university activities involving the processing of personal data and can be contacted at the Vice Chancellors Office. Your personal data will be processed for the purposes outlined in this information sheet. Standard ethical procedures will involve you providing your consent to participate in this study by consenting with the Involvement Officer. The legal basis that we will rely on to process your personal data will be processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest. This public interest justification is approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee, Swansea University. The legal basis that we will rely on to process special categories of data will be processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes.

How long will your information be held?

I will hold any personal data and special categories of data until the findings are published. I anticipate this to be within 2 years, but no longer than 5 years.

What are your rights?

You have a right to access your personal information, to object to the processing of your personal information, to rectify, to erase, to restrict and to port your personal information. Please visit the University Data Protection webpages for further information in relation to your rights. Any requests or objections should be made in writing to the University Data Protection Officer: University Compliance Officer (FOI/DP), Vice-Chancellor's Office, Swansea University, Singleton Park, Swansea, SA2 8PP, Email: dataprotection@swansea.ac.uk

How to make a complaint?

If you are unhappy with the way in which your personal data has been processed. You may in the first instance contact the University Data Protection Officer using the contact details above. If you remain dissatisfied, then you have the right to apply directly to the Information Commissioner for a decision. The Information Commissioner can be contacted at - Information Commissioner's Office, Wycliffe House, Water Lane, Wilmslow, Cheshire, SK9 5AF www.ico.org.uk

What if I have other questions?

If you have further questions about this study, please do not hesitate to contact me:

Ceryn Evans (Ceryn.Evans@swansea.ac.uk)

Annex B: Participant consent form (sample)

Project title. From students to graduates: examining the post-graduation transitions of care experiences students

	Please tick
I confirm that I have read and understood the information sheet for the study.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that they I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reasons.	
I am happy for the information I provide to be used anonymously in academic papers, reports, and conferences.	
I am willing for the meeting to be audio recorded	
I agree to taking part in this study	
I agree to the researchers processing my personal data in accordance with the aims of the study described in the Participant Information Sheet.	

Signature.....

Name printed.....

Date.....

Care experienced students and graduates



What is the research about?

The research is exploring care experienced students' and graduates' views and experiences of university. If you are a university student or recent graduate (in the past 4 years) and are care experienced, you are invited to take part in my research.

If I agree to take part, what will I be required to do?

You will be invited to take part in an interview which will last between 45-60 minutes.

Is my participation voluntary?

Your participation is entirely voluntary. If you decide to take part but later decide that you don't want to be involved, you can end your involvement in the research without giving a reason.

Who do I contact if I'd like to take part?

If you're interested in taking part, please contact Ceryn Evans (Ceryn.Evans@swansea.ac.uk).

Ceryn Evans is a senior lecturer at Swansea University. To find out more about her: <https://www.swansea.ac.uk/staff/ceryn.evans/>