

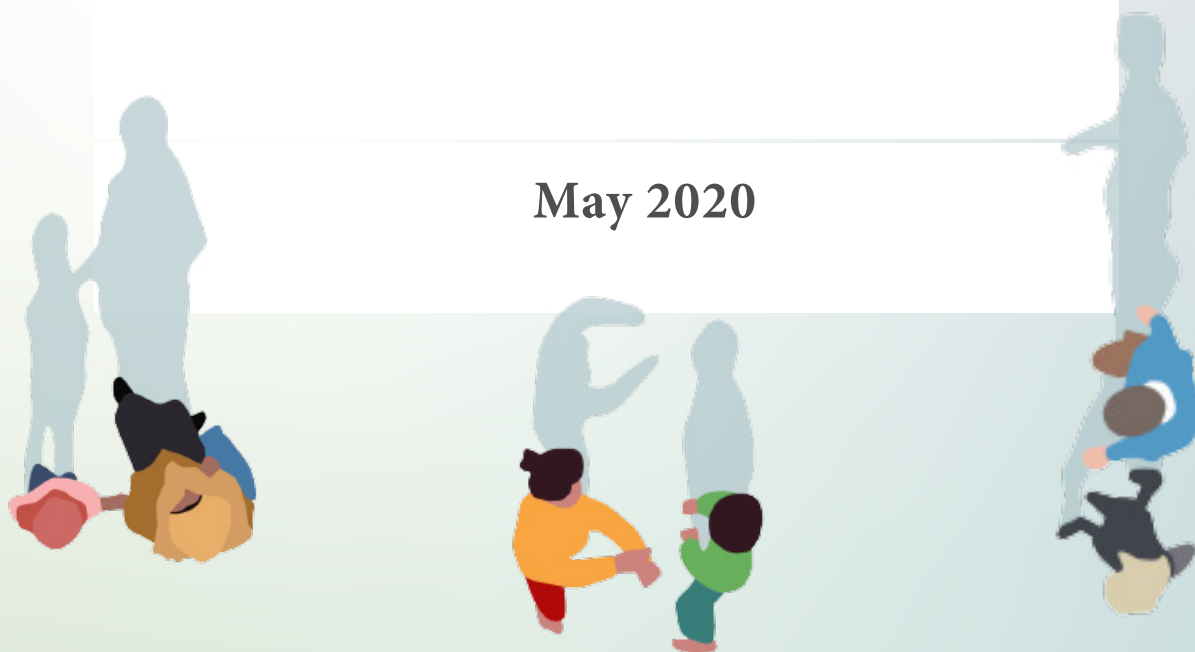


What Works *for*  
**Children's  
Social Care**

CARDIFF  
UNIVERSITY  
PRIFYSGOL  
CAERDYDD

# CARE-EXPERIENCED YOUNG PEOPLE AND HIGHER EDUCATION

May 2020





# What Works for Children's Social Care

## Acknowledgements

We would like to say a huge thank you to all the young people who took part in the study, who considered, answered and in some cases debated our questions, and in doing so shared their experiences of secondary and higher education and the impact that being in care or having been in care had on them. We also owe thanks to individuals in English Schools, Virtual Schools, Universities and Become who became involved in the study and took time and effort outside of their usual work to put us in touch with the young people who were or had been in care that we wanted to talk to. Without such generosity, interest and time, the study could not have taken place.

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## About What Works for Children's Social Care

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# CONTENTS

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<b>1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5. QUALITATIVE FINDINGS</b>	<b>20</b>
Background	4	University Expectations	20
Study design	4	Transition to University	24
Findings	4		
Implications	5	<b>6. DISCUSSION</b>	<b>28</b>
		Conclusions and recommendations	30
<b>2. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>6</b>		
		<b>7. REFERENCES</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>3. METHODS</b>	<b>8</b>		
Research design	8	<b>8. APPENDICES</b>	<b>34</b>
Research Questions	8	Appendix A: Recoding and defining variables in next steps data	34
Quantitative Methods	8	Appendix B: Tables relating to quantitative analysis	37
Qualitative Methods	9	Appendix C: Interview schedule	41
<b>4. QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS</b>	<b>12</b>		
Expectations regarding university	12		
Outcomes at Sweep 7	17		
Summary	19		

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# 1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Background

Care experienced children and young people hold lower expectations of attending university than others the same age. In time, these expectations are realised as evidence shows that care experienced children and young people in the United Kingdom are significantly less likely to progress into higher education when compared to those who never entered care. Factors underlying this relatively low educational attainment are complex. Social class, poverty, abuse and neglect before care entry all make a contribution, but while being in care does stop and reduce declines in educational achievement, it does not close the educational attainment gap between those with care experience and their peers.

This study is concerned with factors that might influence the expectations held by care experienced young people, with further interest in how they change over time. The study also explores the experiences of young people who were in or had been previously in care when applying to university as well as factors that affect their well-being and progress while there. Overall, the study is interested in how education, care and university services can promote university attendance for care experienced young people.

## Study design

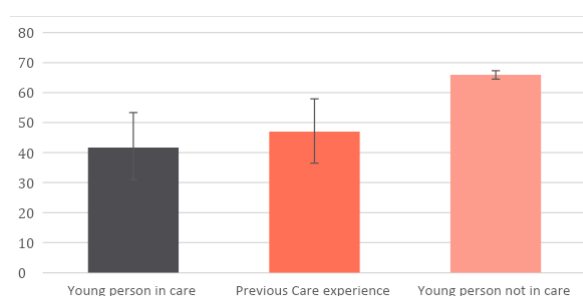
The study employed mixed methods. The quantitative arm explored the expectations of care experienced Year 9 pupils in relation to going to university, how these changed over time, and how they related to later involvement in higher education. This was carried out through the analysis of the Next Steps dataset which follows the progress of a cohort of English young people (n= 15,770) of whom 231 were classified

as either in care or care experienced at the start of the study.

Qualitative research was conducted to gain richer detail of university expectations and attitudes and explore what influences them over time. The data comprised 6 face to face interviews with school aged pupils in school years 9/10 and 12/13, 11 interviews with care experienced university students and a focus group attended by 6 care experienced young people, 4 of whom had been to university and 2 who had not.

## Findings

Quantitative analysis showed that young people who were either in care or care experienced at 13- or 14-years old, had significantly lower expectations of attending university than peers who had not entered care, as shown by Figure A.



**Figure A. Percentages of young people who think they are likely to apply to go to university**

These lower expectations remained even when the young people's Special Educational Needs (SEN) status, history of school exclusions, and family benefit levels were taken into account. The analysis was able to track the outcomes of young people who remained in the study until they were 19/20 years old. This allowed the link between expectations of applying to university when



13 or 14 years old and actual attendance to be explored. Findings indicated that young people who thought in Year 9 that they were likely to apply for university were much less likely to be in higher education at age 20 if they were care experienced, even when factors such as SEN, history of exclusions and family benefits were taken into account. While it is recognised that care experienced young people tend to progress to higher education at a later age, this finding shows that the levels of expectation of attending university held by care experienced young people were less likely to be fulfilled by age 20 when compared to that of their peers.

Qualitative research supported existing knowledge of factors that can reduce care experienced young people's expectations of going to university: key elements being the support offered by schools, the priority given by social workers to education, and the support given by carers. Findings also suggest that some local authorities are not giving sufficient attention to young people's transition to university or wellbeing while there, with some dissonance between the support local authorities said they would offer and that which materialised. Additionally, the study found that although high levels of support were not provided by all of the universities attended by participants, where it existed the support met care experienced young

people's needs to a large extent; especially those of a financial or emotional nature. This level of support reduced anxiety about transitions to university and helped students feel better supported when there.

## Implications

This report has a few clear implications. First, that although expectations for university are lower for care-experienced young people than their peers, that this need not be the case and that many of these young people find their expectations lowering throughout their educational journey.

This fall must be arrested, and the gap between the expectation and reality for these young people closed, if we are to ensure that young people who have been in care have the same chances and opportunities in life as other young people.

It is also clear that the responsibility for this does not fall to one person within the child's life. The qualitative findings show that social workers, teachers, and higher education providers can all contribute to ensure that young people believe in themselves, in their chances for the future, and are given every tool and opportunity to achieve what they set out to.

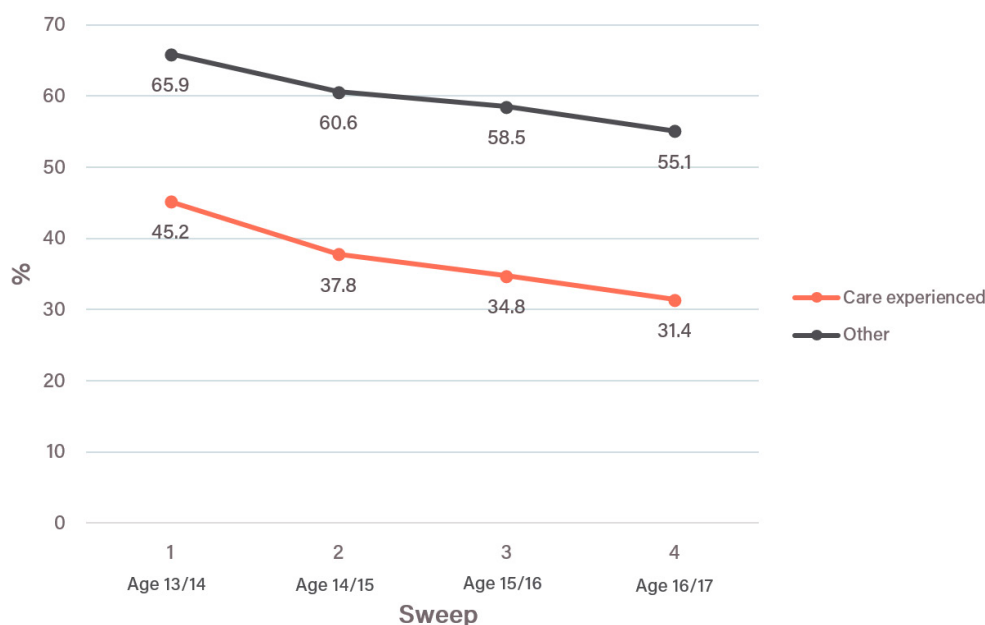


Figure B. Percentages of young people within sweeps 1 to 4 indicating whether they think they are likely to apply to go to university



# 2 INTRODUCTION

It is widely recognised that all children who enter care should be supported in ways that allow them to reach their full potential without being negatively affected by their care experience (NICE, 2010). Despite this, care experienced young people in the United Kingdom remain significantly disadvantaged in the education system and are much less likely to enter higher education.

The educational attainment gap that exists between care experienced young people and peers in the general population starts early and increases over time (Cotton et al., 2014; Sebba et al., 2015). While it is recognised that the chaotic lives of many children and young people before care entry is likely to negatively affect later achievement (Lipkin, 2016; Harrison, 2017) the persistence and recent widening of the attainment gap (DfE, 2019) suggests that while care has, on average, a positive impact on attainment, more could still be done.

The benefits of higher academic achievement are known. Young people who gain qualifications from higher educational institutes are more likely to secure well-paid employment, which in turn supports a better quality of life (Jackson & Cameron, 2014). Higher educational provides opportunities to build social and community relationships, undertake work experience and participate in a range of leisure activities (Mendes et al., 2014). In England, despite measures (e.g. The Children Act 1989; The Children and Young Persons Act 2008; The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010, The Children and Families Act 2014; Children and Social Work Act 2017; The Care Leavers Covenant, 2018) implemented or formulated to support care experienced children and young people and improve academic progress, they are still less likely to progress to higher education. Indeed figures show that only 6% enter university at the age of 18 (Sebba et al., 2015) and while

rates rise to 12% by 23 years old, they remain significantly lower than the general population (Harrison, 2017). It is of further concern that many care experienced young people who do attend higher education tend to be older, to be studying part-time and live in their own home, all of which can negatively affect engagement in student life, processes, practices and culture (Kantanis, 2002, Donaldson & Townsend, 2007; Mallman & Lee (2017)). They are also less likely to attend universities with a highly selective history of academic achievement universities or take subjects such as science, engineering, languages or the humanities (Harrison, 2019; Stevenson et al., 2020).

Children and young people's expectations of going to university are likely predictors of attendance (O'Higgins, et.al 2015). Research conducted by Allnatt (2020) has noted that the expectations of care experienced young people in relation to attending university are lower than others their age. This has been attributed to a lack of consideration of university as a viable option by social service and school systems (Jackson & Cameron, 2014), inadequate financial support and a lack of information about funding entitlement (Ellis & Johnston, 2019; CSJ, 2019).

Barriers to higher education persist when care experienced young people do gain a place, with evidence indicating that around 38% are likely to withdraw from their course and not return (Harrison, 2017) compared to 6.3% of non-care





experienced peers (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2019). Research suggests that insufficient personal, academic, financial and housing support are contributory factors to retention rates (Jackson & Cameron 2014; Ellis & Johnston, 2019; CSJ, 2019). Exploration of what helps care experienced students stay in higher education confirms many of these factors. For example, Hauari et al (2020) found that the presence of a 'significant adult' such as a personal tutor or other university staff who proactively show interest and provides tailored support is key, as is the provision of sufficient financial support.

This project aimed to increase our understanding of the expectations of young people in care regarding higher education, how this change over time, what the barriers to aspiration and success are, and what can be done about it.





# 3 METHODS

## Research design

The study employed a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods<sup>1</sup>. The quantitative arm of the study consisted of the secondary analysis of Next Steps; a longitudinal dataset which followed 15,770 young people in England born in 1989-90, of whom 231 were classified for the purposes of this study as either in care or care experienced. Allnatt (2020) used Next Steps data to explore care experienced young peoples' expectations in relation to higher education. This project builds on this work by exploring further factors that affect those expectations and investigates how these were associated with subsequent entry into higher education.

The qualitative part of the study sought to gain richer detail of the experiences, expectations, and attitudes of care experienced young people in relation to university. Specifically, the study was interested in finding out what prevented or promoted such expectations, what facilitated or discouraged the process of transitioning to university, and what affected young people's ability to remain there and complete the course. To address these questions, we conducted qualitative interviews and focus groups with 24 care experienced participants, including 15 studying at universities, three in the process of applying, and six school pupils.

## Research Questions

The questions the project sought to answer were:

- What expectations do care experienced young people have with respect to going to

university and how do these change over time?

- What influences care-experienced young people's expectations in relation to university?
- How can key care, education and university stakeholders help best support care-experienced young people in their consideration of and application to university?
- What support is needed for care-experienced young people once in university?

## Quantitative Methods

### The Data

Next Steps (formerly the Longitudinal Study of Young People in England) is a study which started following the lives of 15,770 young people from England who were in school year 9 (age 13/14) in 2004. Young people involved in the study answered surveys on an annual basis until 2010 (age 20/21) with a five year follow-up conducted in 2015/6. The earlier waves of the study also included surveys with parents. Because the data follows young people over time, it means that their expectations in year 9 with respect to attending university can be compared with their later outcomes<sup>2</sup>. However, the data stems from a time before more recent policy changes increasing the age of mandatory education in England to 18. Hence, the young people in this study had a wider range of post-16 options than current children of their age. The initial sample included 231 young people who were either in care or care experienced. This number excludes

1 Ethical approval for this research design was obtained from the School of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, Cardiff University.

2 The analysis considered the young people's expectations in relation to applying for *university* and how this was related to their outcomes in relation to attending or being in the process of applying for *higher education*. This is due to the questions asked in the Next Steps surveys (See Appendix A).





**Table 1. Numbers of Care Experienced Young People in Next Steps Data Set**

Category	n
In care or care experienced	231
Never been in care	13808
Previous care experience but adoption or care with parents only	25
Information not provided	1706

those whose only experience of care was being adopted or being subject to a Care Order but remaining with their own parents<sup>3</sup>. Those who were adopted after a period in foster care or any alternative form of care outside their home, were however, classified as care experienced.

This study used data from Sweeps 1-4 and 7. Further details about the data are available in Appendix A.

### Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis of the Next Steps data set explored care experienced young people's expectations in relation to attending university and how these compared to peers with no history of care. It also looked at how these expectations changed between school years 9 and 12, and how they related to eventual likelihood of attending higher education.

Data collected through surveys can contain some levels of bias. This happens because the data is collected from schools that may not be entirely representative of the whole population. In addition to this, longitudinal surveys suffer from attrition, with young people dropping out and with fewer participants involved in later Sweeps. Because of this, statistical methods used for analysis have to compensate for this bias and the developers of the survey provide weightings that can be used so that the results can be considered not just in terms of those in the sample, but in terms of how they apply to the entire population. The analysis

in this study was carried out in STATA, and the analysis was adjusted for the sample design and levels of attrition as recommended by the survey developers (Department for Education, 2011, p. 76). This report therefore includes both the figures obtained from the survey, and the weighted and adjusted figures (with confidence intervals) which provide more accurate estimates of these factors in the wider population.

Two binary logistic regression models were developed. These were also applied in such a way that they adjusted for the way the sample was designed, and attrition from the survey. In both cases the correlation matrix and multicollinearity tests indicated that there were no problems with multicollinearity, and a Pearson Chi<sup>2</sup> goodness-of-fit test indicated that the model was a good fit for the data. R<sup>2</sup> statistics are not reported because they are not considered appropriate when carrying out logistic regression with clustered data (Williams 2019).

### Qualitative Methods

Qualitative data was collected using face to face interviews with care experienced young people in school years 9/10 and 12 which took place at school. Similar interviews with care experienced university students were conducted in or near their universities at a place of their choice. A focus group with young people over 18 years of age who had left school was also conducted.

<sup>3</sup> Adopted children may leave care systems when relatively young and enter families which provide support similar to that provided for children in the general population. Those who remain with their own parents were excluded because they live with parents responsible for their care.



## Recruitment

Interviews with care-experienced young people still at secondary school were organised via 'Virtual Schools': integral parts of local authorities that exist to promote the progress and educational attainment of children/young people who are or who have been in care. Virtual Schools facilitated contact with stakeholders in schools across England. These stakeholders identified and approached potential participants, supplied information about the study and put those interested in touch with the research team. Four schools took part, and where necessary obtained carer consent.

Young people currently at, or who had previously attended, university were recruited through two routes. First university personnel or units with responsibility for the well-being of students with care experience were contacted. Where interest was shown, staff were provided with information about the study and asked to facilitate contact with suitable students. Researchers then contacted students and interviews were arranged. Contact was also made with 'Become' a charity which advises and supports care-experienced children and young people. This facilitated contact with young people who had shown interest in the study and a focus group with care experienced

young people was held. While most had attended university, two had not. In addition, three young people considering applying to university who had attended a care leaver's open day were interviewed.

The interview and focus group schedules focused on experiences at participants' current stage of education. Additionally, older participants' reflections around their attitudes to higher education when younger, and younger student's predictions of their future in relation to higher education were explored. Interview and focus group schedules can be found in Appendix C.

## Sample

A total of 26 young people who were either in care or care experienced took part in the qualitative research. One-to-one interviews were carried out face-to-face with six young people in school (Years 9, 10 and 12), two school leavers considering applications to university (with a questionnaire being delivered by a third who preferred not to be interviewed), and 11 university students. In addition, a focus group was held with a mix of four care experienced young people who had attended university after leaving school and two who had not. Sample characteristics are presented in Table 2.

**Table 2. Characteristics of Participants in Interviews and Focus Groups**

	Number	Age Range	Gender	Type of Placement *
<b>School Pupils</b>	6	14-16	3 Female 3 Male	5 Foster care 1 Family care
<b>Care experienced young people interested in applying for university</b>	3	20**	3 Female	2 Residential Care 1 Not known
<b>Care experienced young people who did not attend university</b>	2	23-27	2 Male	1 Residential Care 1 Not known
<b>Care experienced students at university</b>	15 (6 elite university, 9 other university)	18-27	14 Female 1 Male	1 Adopted 6 Residential Care 6 Foster Care 2 Not known

\* For those who have already left care this refers to their last placement before leaving care

\*\*Age data only available for two of the three young people



## Data Analysis

Qualitative data was securely stored in university computers and analysed using NVivo 11 software. A framework approach was used to organise, categorise and analyse the qualitative data. The framework was developed from the research questions and supported by existing literature (e.g. Allnatt, 2020; Hauari et al, 2020; Centre for Social Justice, 2019; Ellis & Johnston, 2019; Jackson & Cameron, 2014 (e.g. Jackson & Cameron, 2014; Ellis & Johnston, 2019;)). The framework approach applies a coding framework of themes and sub-themes through which the transcribed interviews are categorised or 'coded', thus ensuring analytical consistency and allowing comparisons to be made across the different interviews. The analysis was undertaken by two researchers.





# 4 QUANTITATIVE FINDINGS

The analysis of Next Steps was carried out in two stages. First, young people's expectations with respect to attending university while they were in school were explored. This included their expectations in year 9 and how these changed over the remainder of their time at secondary school.

The second stage used data from Sweep 7 of the study when the young people were approximately aged 20/21. Analysis considered the association between young people thinking they would apply for university when they were in year 9, and actual attendance.

At each stage the findings are considered in terms of how care experienced young people differ from those who are not care experienced. Information about their care experience was derived from questions answered by parents during the first Sweep of the study when the young people were in Year 9 or equivalent. The initial piece of analysis used only data taken when the children were in school Year 9 (Section 4.1.a) and this considered children who were in care and care experienced separately. Children were classified as in care if at the time of the survey they were either in a foster placement, a young person's home, or in some other care arrangement where they did not reside with their own parents. Children were classified as care experienced if they had been in care through one of these arrangements previously but not in care at the time of the first Sweep. As explained above, those whose only experience of care was adoption or in care but remaining with own parents, were not classified as care experienced. Children whose only experience of care was adoption were excluded because they may leave care systems when relatively young and enter families which provide support similar to that provided for children in the general population. Those who remain with their own parents were excluded

because they live with parents responsible for their care. In cases where there were children were adopted or in care but remaining with their own parents but had also been subject to other forms of care they were included as in care or care experienced. Subsequent analyses (from Section 4.1.b onwards) used data collected after the children were in Year 9, and all young people either in care or care experienced in Year 9 were classified as care experienced. Further details about the prevalence of different types of care experience in the data and the attrition in this sample are available in Appendix A.

## Expectations regarding university

### Expectations in Year 9

Table 3 shows the numbers and percentages of young people who were in care, care experienced or never in care in year 9, and their indications of whether they thought they were likely to apply to go to university.



Table 3. Young person indicating they think they are likely to apply to go to university at Sweep 1

	Non weighted or adjusted figures			Weighted and adjusted for sample design	
	n	N	%	%	CI
Young person in care	39	80*	48.8	41.7	[30.9, 53.4]
Previous Care experience	72	138*	52.2	47.0	[36.5, 57.9]
Young person not in care	9,427	13,610	69.3	65.9	[64.5, 67.3]

\* totals add up to fewer than 231 due to missing data

In line with Allnatt (2020) the results show that young people in care or care experienced were less likely than those who never entered care to indicate they are likely to go to university. The adjusted figures suggest that 41.7% of those in

care, and 47.0% of those care experienced in Year 9 considered that they were likely to apply to go to university, compared to 65.9% of those who had never been in care. Previous research has shown that certain factors are related to

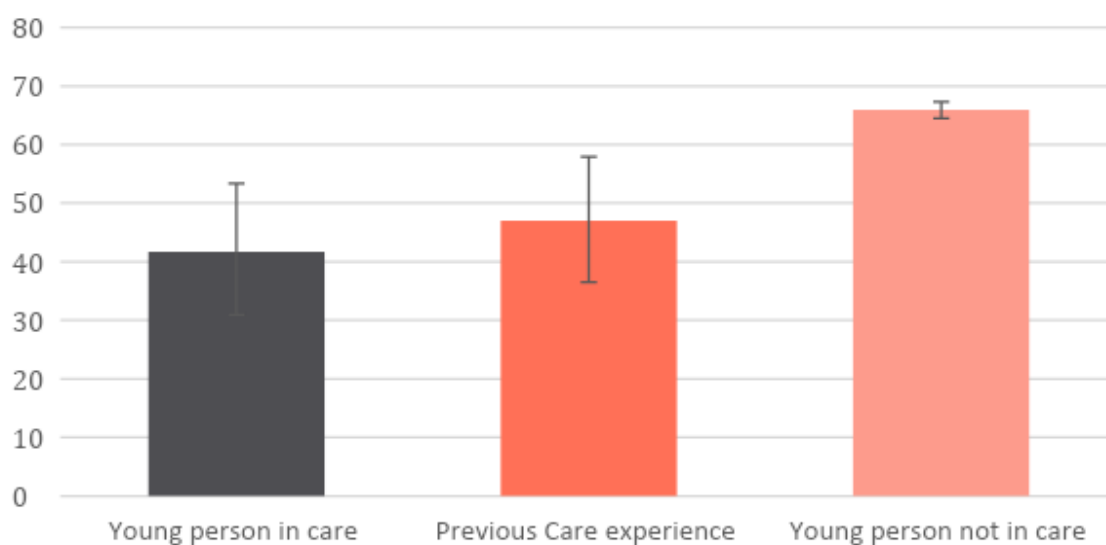


Figure 1. Percentages of young people who think they are likely to apply to go to university

both the likelihood of a young person being taken into care and not going to university. These include deprivation, having Special Educational Needs (SEN), and a higher rate of school exclusions (Sebba et al., 2015; Harrison, 2017). A binary logistic regression model was developed to investigate the likelihood of young

people indicating they would be likely to apply to university, when some of these other factors were taken into consideration. The factors considered were the young person's gender, whether they had SENs, whether the young person had ever been temporarily excluded from school, and whether their parents were in receipt of benefits<sup>4</sup>.

4 Next Steps did not record FSM. Benefits measure indicating that the main parent or carer was in receipt of benefits either because of low income or unemployment was used.





More details about this model are available in Table B7, Appendix B. It is recognised that there are additional factors that may be related to both likelihood of care and entry to university, however indicators of such measures were not found in the data set<sup>5</sup>.

Several of the factors had a significant association with the likelihood of young people saying they were likely to apply for university. Of these, having SEN had the strongest association. For the 'average' young person in the dataset the model predicts that the probability of them indicating they that they are likely to apply to university is 0.66, however if they have SEN<sup>6</sup> then this predicted probability is 0.49. Having had at least one previous temporary school exclusion also made pupils less likely to report they would apply (predicted probability of 0.51). Being in care at Sweep 1 was also significantly associated with lower expectations, even when the presence of these other factors were taken into account (Predicted probability 0.52), as did a family being in receipt of benefits (Predicted probability 0.58).

This means that the lower levels of expectations among those who were in care did not just occur because these young people are more likely to have SENs, to have been excluded from school, or to be from families in receipt of benefits.

### Changes over time in how likely young people think it is they will go to university

The question of how likely young people were to apply for university was repeated during Sweeps 2, 3 and 4 of the study, when the young people were in the equivalent of school Years 10, 11 and 12. Table 4 shows the numbers and proportions of young people who indicated that they think it is likely that they would apply to go to university at each of those Sweeps. In this section and all subsequent pieces of analysis those who were in care and care experienced in Sweep 1 of the study are classified together as care experienced. This was done because no information about the young person's exact care status was available in the data set after age 13/14. It was therefore not possible to know if a young person was in care

**Table 4. Young person indicating they think they are likely to apply to go to university at Sweeps 1 to 4**

	Non weighted or adjusted figures			Weighted and adjusted for sample design	
	n	N	%	%	CI
<b>Sweep 1</b>					
Care experienced	111	218	50.9	45.2	[37.0, 53.7]
Never in care	9,427	13,610	69.3	65.9	[64.5, 67.3]
<b>Sweep 2</b>					
Care experienced	82	177	46.3	37.8	[29.7, 46.7]
Never in care	7,682	11,839	64.9	60.6	[59.0, 62.1]
<b>Sweep 3</b>					
Care experienced	69	161	42.9	34.8	[26.7, 43.9]
Never in care	7,002	10,953	63.9	58.5	[56.8, 60.1]
<b>Sweep 4</b>					
Care experienced	58	139	41.7	31.4	[24.0, 40.0]
Not in care	6,202	10,068	61.6	55.1	[53.4, 56.7]

<sup>5</sup> Some data was also not included because of problems with multicollinearity in the models.

<sup>6</sup> Predicted probabilities calculated using STATA margins postestimation command, with all other variables held at mean levels.



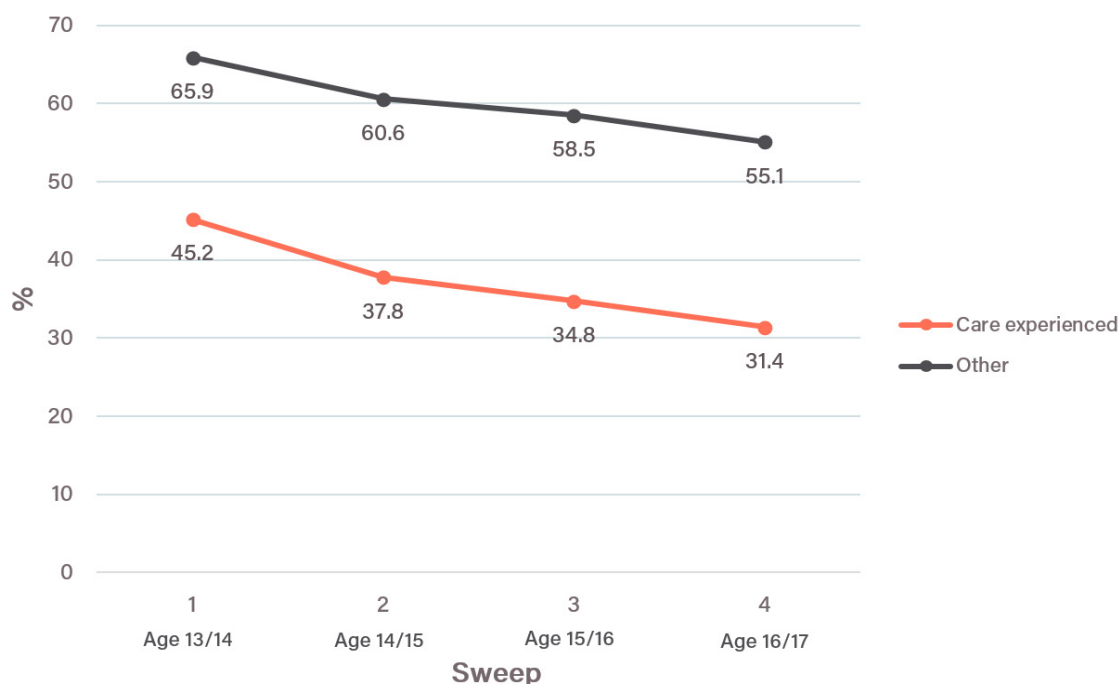


Figure 2. Percentages of young people within sweeps 1 to 4 indicating whether they think they are likely to apply to go to university

when questions were asked during later Sweeps of the study.

Because of the attrition experienced in the survey it is useful to consider the weighted and adjusted figures. These show that both groups experience a decline in their expectations of going to university over time, but that this fall is larger for care experienced young people than for their peers (a fall of 13.8% points compared to 10.8% points), meaning that the gap, already substantial, increases over time.

### Expectations for two years' time

At Sweep 4 of the study young people were asked a series of additional questions regarding the expectations for the future and their attitudes to university. Young people were asked to select from a range of things they thought they would be most likely to be doing in two years' time. The responses according to the young person's care status in year 9 are shown in Figure 3. Full figures for all pieces of quantitative analysis are provided in Appendix B.

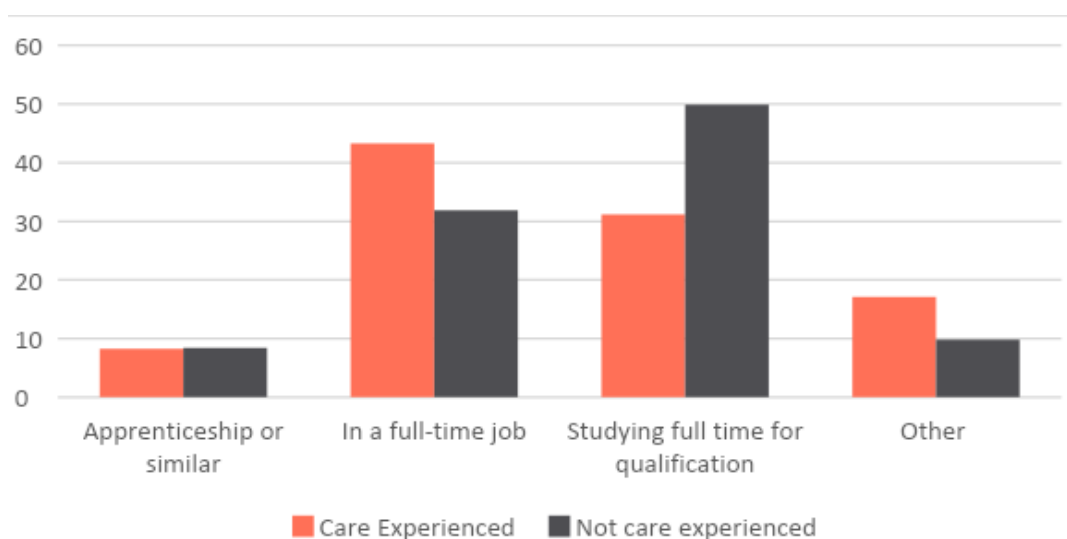


Figure 3. Percentages of Young People with different Expectations for two years' time (Weighted and adjusted figures)



Those who had no care experience at Sweep 1 were more likely to indicate that they would be studying for a qualification, while those in the care experienced group were more likely to think they would be in a full-time job. The other category was comprised of several smaller categories coded together. It included: looking for work or unemployed; looking after the home or family full time; taking a break from study or work; other (specify); and don't know.

### Attitudes to University at Sweep 4

At Sweep 4 the young people were also asked how strongly they agreed with the following statements:

- I don't need to have a university degree to get the kind of job I want to
- I need to have a university degree to get the kind of job I want to

- The best jobs go to people who have been to university
- Most of my friends are planning to go to university
- People like me don't go to university

The differences in responses among those who were care experienced or in care at Sweep 1 and those who were not are illustrated by Figures 4 to 8. Full statistics with confidence intervals and the significance of Chi<sup>2</sup> tests are provided in Appendix B.

As these figures show, care experienced young people were less likely to agree that they need a degree to get the kind of job wanted, and less likely to indicate that most of their friends were planning to go to university. They were also more likely to agree with the statement, 'people like me don't go to university'.

Figures 4-8. Responses to the following statements:

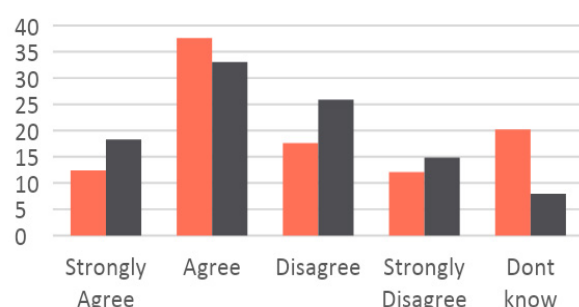


Figure 4. I don't need to have a university degree to get the kind of job I want to

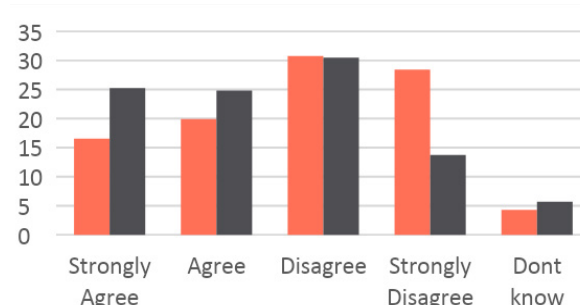


Figure 5. I need to have a university degree to get the kind of job I want to

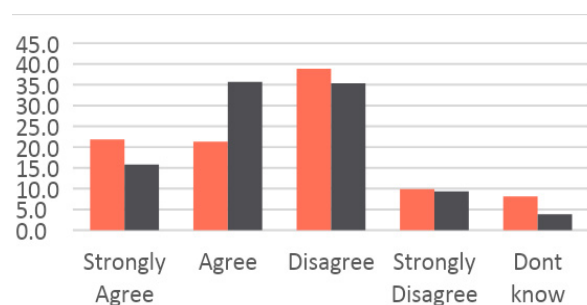


Figure 6. The best jobs go to people who have been to University

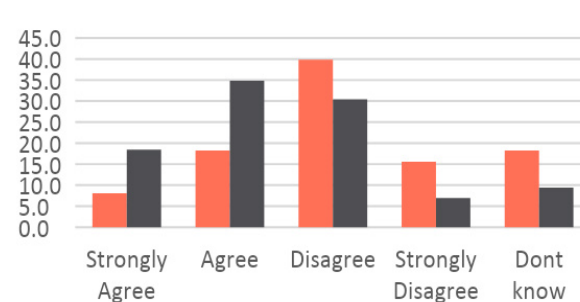


Figure 7. Most of my friends are planning on going to University

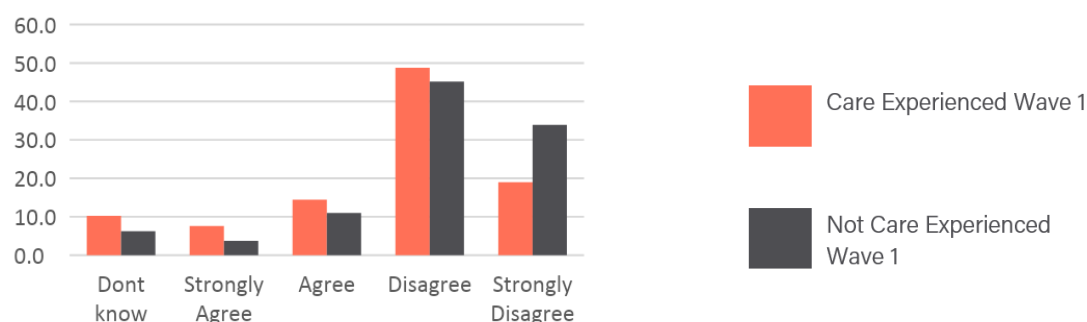


Figure 8. People like me don't go to University

## Outcomes at Sweep 7

Sweep 7 of the data collection was carried out when the young people were 20 or 21 years old. By this stage some of the young people were already at university, or other forms of higher education, or were in the process of applying to attend. This meant it was possible to explore how the young people's expectations in relation to applying for university when they were in year 9 were related to the likelihood of them being in higher education at the age of 20/21.

Of the 231 young people who were care experienced or in care at Sweep 1 only 90 remained in the sample by Sweep 7. These young people were much less likely to indicate that they were in higher education or applying to go than their counterparts who were not care experienced by year 9 (see Table 5). Those who were care experienced were therefore far less likely to be in higher education or applying, with the adjusted figures suggesting around 13.1% of these young people were in or applying, as compared to 41.4% of those who were not care experienced by year 9.

Table 5. Likelihood of being in higher education at Sweep 7, by Care Experience at Sweep 1

	Care Experienced				Not Care Experienced			
	Non weighted and adjusted		Weighted and adjusted		Non weighted and adjusted		Weighted and adjusted	
	n	%	%	CI	n	%	%	CI
Higher Education	22*	24.7	13.1	[7.9, 21.0]	3925	51.2	41.4	[39.3, 42.7]
No Higher Education	67*	75.3	86.9	[79.0, 92.1]	3742	48.8	58.6	[57.3, 60.7]

Table 6 presents figures showing how those who indicated in year 9 that they were likely to apply for university differed from those who thought

they were not likely to apply, in terms of whether they were either in higher education or had accepted a place to go at Sweep 7.

Table 6. Likelihood of being in higher education at Sweep 7, by whether or not they thought they were likely to apply at Sweep 1

	Young people who thought they were likely to apply				Young people who thought they were not likely to apply			
	Non weighted and adjusted		Weighted and adjusted		Non weighted and adjusted		Weighted and adjusted	
	n	%	%	CI	n	%	%	CI
Higher Education	3,843	62.0	54.1	[52.2, 56.0]	464	20.9	14.8	[13.4, 16.3]
No Higher Education	2,354	38.0	46.0	[44.0, 47.8]	1,757	79.1	85.2	[83.7, 86.6]

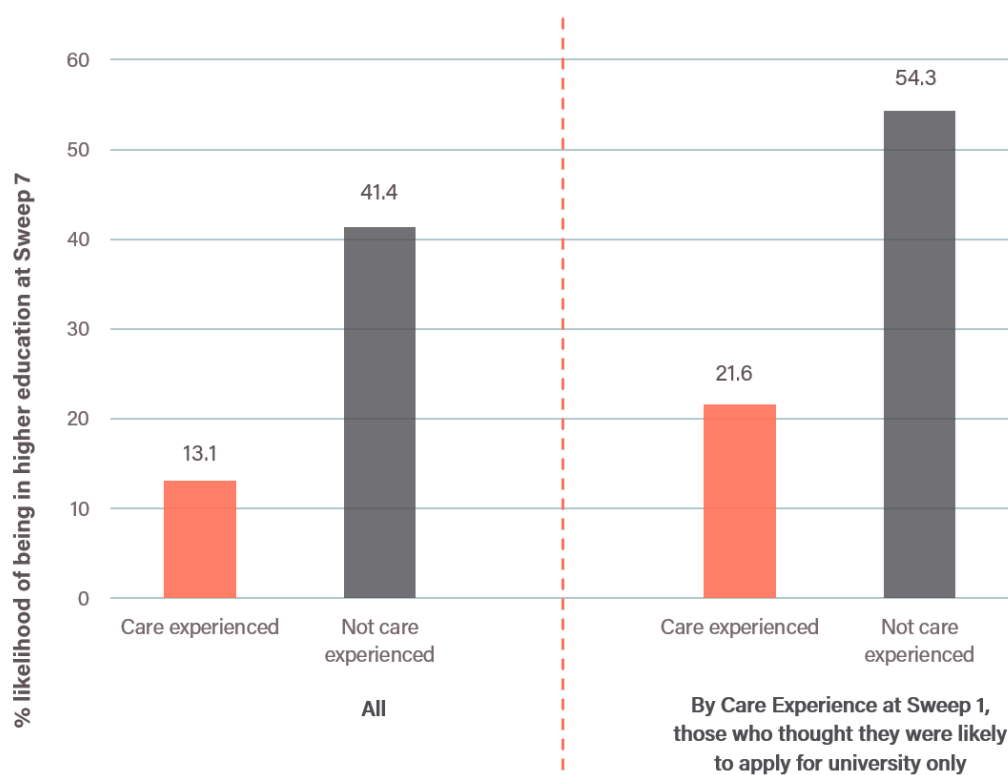


Looking only at those who had indicated that they thought they were likely to apply for university in year 9, it is also apparent that those who were

care experienced were far less likely to now be in or higher education, as shown in Table 7.

**Table 7. Likelihood of being in higher education at Sweep 7, by Care Experience at Sweep 1, Those who thought they were likely to apply for university only**

	Care Experienced				Not Care Experienced			
	Non weighted and adjusted		Weighted and adjusted		Non weighted and adjusted		Weighted and adjusted	
	n	%	%	CI	n	%	%	CI
Higher Education	17	36.2	21.6	[12.0, 35.8]	3,484	62.2	54.3	[52.4, 56.3]
No Higher Education	30	63.8	78.4	[64.2, 88.0]	2,114	37.8	45.7	[43.8, 48.3]



**Figure 8. Percentage likelihood of being in higher education at Sweep 7, by Care Experience at Sweep 1, all and those who thought they were likely to apply for university only**

Using the adjusted figures, it suggested that around 54% of all young people who thought they were likely to apply for university in year 9 were either in it or had been offered places. This indicated that nearly half the young people from the entire population who had thought they were likely to apply did not end up going. However, the percentage of care experienced young people

who had originally thought that they were likely to apply that had actually entered or applied was much lower, at 21.6%.

In order to check this when other factors were taken into account, a binary logistic regression model was developed. The factors considered were the same ones considered in Section 4.1a



above, namely the young person's sex, SEN status, temporary exclusions from school and level of household benefit. Technical details relating to this are available in Appendix B. The models showed that, perhaps unsurprisingly, the factor that had the most effect on whether or not a young person was in higher education or applying to go, was that they had previously indicated they were likely to apply (OR 5.59). This was followed by a history of temporary school exclusions in year 9 (OR 0.26). After this it was care experience that had the greatest impact (OR 0.35).

The model was used to calculate the predicted probability of a young person in different situations being in or applying for higher education by Sweep 7. This suggests that if a young person was never in care, and thought they were likely to apply for higher education at Sweep 1, the probability of them being in or about to go to university Sweep 7 (when all the other factors in the model were taken into account) was 0.54 [CI 0.53, 0.56]. Whereas for a young person who was care experienced, then the predicted probability was 0.31 [CI 0.18, 0.44].

## Summary

This section presented the findings of the quantitative analysis of the Next Steps data set. It has shown that young people who were in care during year 9 or equivalent, were less likely to indicate that they would apply to go to university, even when factors like their SEN status, history of school exclusions, and levels of household benefits were taken into account. It also shows that the lower expectations with respect to applying for university persist over the secondary school years. Furthermore, care experienced young people were less likely to have entered higher education by age 20/21 even if at year 9 they had considered that it was likely they would apply to university when they were older.

These findings help answer the study's first research question which asked about the expectations of care-experienced young people to apply for and enter university. However, it was

considered that a deeper understanding of these issues would be gained by carrying out qualitative interviews with care experienced young people either still in school or post compulsory school age. The next chapter is concerned with the qualitative arm of the study which addresses these issues.





# 5 QUALITATIVE FINDINGS

The qualitative stage of the study was concerned with the views and experiences of care experienced young people in relation to attending university. First, it considered held expectations to apply to university and the factors that influenced this in school and further education. It then explored the experiences of applying to and attending university.

## University Expectations

When deliberating on their expectations for university attendance, young people spoke of distinctly different types of support for this ambition. Some of the sources of support identified came from external resources, predominantly the educational and social care systems. Others were internal factors such as resilience and self-esteem which appeared to have been influenced by life events including quality of care and relationships.

## Support from the school system

Many young people had talked about their expectations to attend university with staff at school at some point. Despite this, most school-aged participants said the information provided by school staff had been scant and difficult to understand. Few care experienced young people now at university could recollect any targeted support or encouragement towards university when at school. In general school-based support had been provided by a teacher with personal interest in their wellbeing, rather than in the form of a targeted intervention focused on preparing them for university applications.

*" I had a really good Biology teacher who was very engaging and I was like, oh my gosh I love the human body... and that's when I started looking at options....I*

*would (say) year 9 is when I was like, okay, this is definitely what I want to do*  
- Care experienced university student #14

One current university student did remember there being a dedicated member of staff for vulnerable children at school but described this as limited and not extending to advice on university applications. Other students had attended further education colleges which had displayed good awareness of the support needed for care experienced young people, similar to that reported by Herd & Legge (2017). For these the support had extended to university applications. Where dedicated staff were present, they had been instrumental in successful university applications.

*" I know that college was a big motivator because I wanted to go to university, after I spoke to the student advisor I think she's called, she's amazing yeah... she really helped me with the whole UCAS process... she helped me with like my personal statement and sort of, she was so supportive like she gave me references... She like pushed me, she said to me like, 'I've [got] faith in you' - I needed that push - Care experienced university student #5*





Despite this, as in schools, it was often left to individual further education tutors to provide the support rather than it being given by dedicated staff.

Other participants talked of the importance of having individual support when family dynamics had broken down.

**"** *Yeah, where you have a teacher that's going to be like, okay, you know, I know you're a good student and so forth, or I see the potential and I know why this has happening, let me intervene and help. 'Cause for some people those moments could literally shake the rest of their... school and even their lives, so I would say I was fortunate in that sense, definitely -* **Care experienced university student #9**

Overall, young people who received good one-to-one support strongly supported the provision of similar advisors at all schools.

In addition to support from individuals a few young people described how their expectation to attend university had been positively affected by the educational ethos of their school.

**"** *Although it was a state school it was quite a good state school... at least half the school went to uni...it was like the environment just made it sort of natural to do that -* **Care experienced university student #13**

This had been important in motivating some to work and better recognise the value of engaging with education.

**"** *I remember when I wasn't doing very well at one point they pulled me in and said, 'if you don't start coming in and attending then you can't be on this course'. I don't think that'd ever happened before, so it*

*scared me a bit... once I actually started working hard and they saw that they helped me a lot -* **Care experienced university student #8**

The study was also interested in the views and experiences of young people who had not or did not intend to apply to university. Two pupils still at school and one care experienced young person were planning careers that did not need a university education. These participants shared a feeling that higher education can be overvalued, and this had led to experiences of their plans not being listened to by local authority staff and feeling that Higher Education trajectories were the only ones valued by social care staff.

**"** *I always used to voice that I wanted to do creative, so I wanted to be like an actor and work in TV and films, and people kind of just laughed that off because it's not, I guess it's not your normal nine to five working in an office, or being a doctor or being a police officer."* - **Care experienced young person #7, who did not attend university**

## Support within the care system

All but one of the school participants had taken part in conversations with carers about their future and expectations. As found elsewhere (Cameron, 2007) many study participants now at university linked living in a safe long-term foster placement during later school years with high engagement with the education system and good exam results.

**"** *I moved in with the foster carers... once I was with them it was a settled environment, it was quite a big house... it was more structured... after [Mum] died it just completely went out of the window but then when I moved in with them my education started to get better, so I*



**actually did fairly well at GCSEs - Care experienced university student #18**

These participants also entered university earlier (before 20) and were more likely to attend the university with a highly selective history of academic achievement featured in our study, with four of these five students reporting long-term foster care, compared to just two of the six in an alternative institution.

Few of the nine young people known to have been placed in residential homes at some point, talked of staff being encouraging or helpful in relation to education. Only two who had spent time in residential care described any support for university expectations or applications from carers, with brief and seemingly tokenistic efforts reported. One participant described the difficulty of concentrating in school when living in a residential home where they didn't feel supported and were not provided with a suitable environment to succeed.

*"I just went off the rails and I just didn't even, I thought right, well, I've messed up now. I don't get anything in school, no one was giving me any additional help, no one was saying, 'right, do you need... help as your GCSEs are coming up?'... They should have tried to make it as homely as possible which they didn't do... that's what we all needed, we needed a home and it didn't feel like a home, it just felt like we were in an enclosure - Care experienced young person #16, applying for university*

Regardless of the type of care they had experienced many participants talked of the difficulty of being motivated about education when living in stressful and chaotic environments. Poor relationships and disturbances, sometimes violent or otherwise discomfiting, made it very difficult to prioritise their education at any stage.

*"There was just people kicking off there every day... I was just so far away from that and it was so, like alien to me, and I was like, well where am I? So I just begged them and begged them and said I can't be here anymore and I can't concentrate at school and it was everything, nothing's working out - Care experienced young person #16, applying for university*

Young people who had lived in these circumstances had been eager to live in an independent property early. Six university-age interviewees had lived independently by eighteen, this included several at sixteen. While this move alleviated the stress caused by the previous environments, other difficulties, including low income, loneliness, social isolation, and a sudden drop in support arose and were disruptive to school and exams in these important years.

Support from social workers and associated staff varied. For some, a particular social worker or support worker had offered extensive support. Amongst these, dedicated leaving care personal advisors had provided well-received encouragement and advice.

*"A support worker from leaving care service... was really nice actually, he told me to think about going to uni... [said], 'I think it's the best thing for you... you'll still get support'. So if it wasn't for him I wouldn't have. Like I was thinking about it already, but I won't have made the step to go and actually do it because he's the one who helped me fill out my UCAS form - Care experienced young person #27, attending university*

Other university students reported having received limited advice from their social worker and felt that helping them access university had not been high on their social worker's agenda. Many were frustrated by this lack of interest in their education: one university student described



being moved out-of-county against their will for child protection reasons. As found by Cameron et al (2010) new placements could make school attendance impossible and in this case prevented the taking of planned GCSEs. This young person expressed the frustration felt by others who felt that social services should have better account for young people's education in their decision-making.

### Internal factors

As reported elsewhere (Lipkin, 2016; Centre for Social Justice, 2019) a strong sense of the importance of self-motivation or self-reliance amongst the participant young people who were aspiring to or attending university was evident. Individuals spoke of how important this was.

*"To be honest with you, I thought what would be best for me, because there is a field of work that I am aspiring to do, and hopefully ... I need university to do that. But I need like specific subjects in order to get there - Year 12/13 pupil #26*

Despite strong internal motivation to succeed, the task of aspiring to university was more difficult without the close guidance of relatives or specialist advisors.

*"I always wanted to go to university, um that's why I think I actually made it, because like it's really hard, they really limit you and it's really hard to understand the system, it's different you know, if you're from somewhere else. There are like a million qualifications and everybody says different things, it's really hard, so the only way, the reason I made it, is because I wanted to solve that - Care experienced young person #14, attending university*

As noted by Mannay et al (2017) some but not all of the young people described the negative

impact of care experience and associated trauma on their psychological state. They also associated this with a decrease in educational engagement, and the opportunities it offers to progress to university.

*"Settling is hard...There was a few instances where I was just quite angry or I would have outbursts, so I think that was more so because of my situation and what was going on, and maybe starting to process that - Care experienced young person #20, attending university*

*"When I was going through trying to transition in[to care]... it took a lot of emotional strength so to focus on whatever I had to do from school it was just like, it took a back burner - Care experienced young person #23, attending university*

However, some participants, particularly those school aged, described more positive relationships between care experience and education. Two spoke about increases in regular attendance following care entry. Another stated simply that an advantage to their education of care experience was 'feeling safe.' Furthermore, one sixth form student reflected positively on the support they had received from everyone involved in their care.

*"Yeah, everyone that I know, foster carer, social workers they've all been positive towards education - Care experienced young person attending school*

Although there was less emphatic positivity from older participants in the study some recognised positive elements of their care experience and the value of the care and support they received.



## How can things be improved?

While most young people still at school felt their education was sufficiently supported, older participants who looked back at their school experience felt differently, in general there was a sense of having been inadequately supported in their education; especially by social services staff. Most expressed a sense of disappointment.

*"[I] just felt like they didn't care, like I felt they very much cared that like, oh you know, you're great, you're doing amazing, we're so proud and stuff but like when shit hits the fan... they were like, bye, and I was like, oh okay, so this is how you guys really are, interesting and that's it, yeah. I don't think they're supportive - Care experienced university student #18*

When asked what social services could have done better, the majority asked for a stronger educational focus to exist alongside safeguarding concerns while at school. Despite the governmental, local authority and school measures in place some participants felt there should be better integration between education and social services in the form of dedicated support staff, preferably staff with similar care experience who could support, empathise and advocate for children's educational needs.

*"Everybody, or like a certain year group to be assigned with a mentor... a care leaver who understands the situation erm and kind of can connect on an emotional level as well erm, for headteachers [to] understand like if someone's going off the rails it's not just because they're just mad but they are actually experiencing something or going through something. So erm, more interaction and more communication - Care experienced young person #23, attending university*

## Transition to University

Participants were asked for their speculative views on the kind of support that would help them to apply and attend university or for their experiences of having done so. Replies revolved around the clarity and consistency of the types of support available, a dissonance between the support offered and that provided and the importance of a key person who provides support. The themes identified supported the literature cited earlier that suggests inconsistencies in support for care experienced young people's pathways to university contribute to low university expectations amongst this cohort.

### Practical support for applying to university

Across study participants who had applied to university, there was broad agreement that there had been little clear support available. Those still at school had gained most knowledge of the available support at generic school events, rather than through support for care experienced pupils. Most support offered by social workers was also unsatisfactory, some providing little information about university or giving opportunities to fully discuss the issue.

*"Um, we haven't really spoke about applying for uni yet, but she's saying about um, there's an apprenticeship for nursing as well - Year 12/13 pupil #2*

The care experienced young people at university echoed sentiments of unsatisfactory support but extended criticism to a lack of information about events such as open days, or gaining funding to attend.

*"They say there is a lot of things available, but you just don't know how to reach, that's the thing...like, you try for the things that you really, really want for example, uni was something that I really, really wanted, so I fought for it until the*



### end - Care experienced young person #15, attending university

Consequently, some young people felt the task of finding out about university and applying was solely theirs.

*"I know I'm entitled to this uni support. I didn't know like the full extent of it, and I had to dig through this like 1,000-page document and find it - Care experienced young person #10, attending university"*

For some participants the gap in practical support was somewhat filled by universities who supplied information about the financial and wider support available at their institution. Young people discussed how knowing about bursaries and specialist support on offer was a significant factor in their decision making.

When asked about learning support for any knowledge or skills gaps before university, care experienced young people offered mixed views. Some felt a lack of support had seen them starting university disadvantaged, others had been offered preparation support by the university, with one participant having attended 'summer camps' before the first year of study. Where support had been offered it was reported to have had a positive effect.

### Psychological preparation for university

The idea or experience of accessing university and leaving home led to concerns.

Participants who had not yet left home shared more general pre-university worries about missing people and living alone, rather than problems specific to care experience. This age group also displayed a lack of anxiety about the support needed to access and maintain studentship: most anticipated this coming from social services and family. Those who had already gone to university held different views and talked of the difficulties of moving without the help of family members or friends. One received no financial assistance for

the move from social services or the university and so undertook a move requiring four return train journeys, alone. This problem was shared by others who spoke of the negative mental impact.

*"I was talking about all my uni entitlements and stuff, and like I wanted help with like a moving van to get to uni, and they were just like no (...) so like I ended up getting a moving van from a charity that offered to pay for it for me. So I was trying to sell it all in the last week before I went to uni, and it's just like that's so stressful - Care experienced university student #10"*

Some young people attributed such experiences to a local authority emphasis on getting the university place, which led to instances of the support needed to move not materialising.

*"I was determined to do it all myself, like without them, and be like yeah you know, I did this. But I really was like oh I've tried and I can't. And I went to them and they were just like hah, as if you're asking us that, you know...Yeah, they just don't want to help you. They want the figures, but then they're not willing to help you get to where you want to be - Care experienced university student #14"*

Many other accounts of similar struggles to get help and how it was only gained after expending emotional energy, were heard. Inconsistencies in support at this time also impacted on existing tenancies, these led to concerns about accommodation outside term time as well as during semesters. The most extreme example was of a young person who lost their home on going to university because of poor advice and support.

*"And they were like yeah don't worry, you'll be entitled to housing benefits, like the full um maintenance loan and stuff."*





*But because um as a nursing student you are only entitled to like half of the student, no the maintenance loan, because you've got the NHS bursary. Obviously that's changed now. They weren't aware of that, so then I wasn't entitled to benefits. So I ended up prioritising university over my accommodation, because you know, end up getting like £2,000, £3,000 rent arrears because of it, because I couldn't pay my rent. And despite telling social services, I was like I can't live here, I was like I've not got enough money, they were just like okay, we'll talk to someone. Never got anything and I had to give up my flat - Care experienced young person #8, attending university*

When asked to consider what support would have helped during the transition to university, a single point of contact with a dedicated key professional was again seen as crucial.

### Support at university

Many participants continued to experience a lack of support when at university. Where problems arose, they tended to be linked to finance, accommodation and/or pastoral care.

Despite local authorities being required to offer and publish a 'local offer' that provides information about all available services and support for care leavers (Department for Education, 2018) most participants felt they had had insufficient knowledge of their entitlements, especially in relation to financial support from children's social care. Upon making their own enquiries they found the provision in place to be opaque and uneven. Few participants had full understanding of the various bursaries offered, and the financial support received was highly variable. Some had been promised financial assistance, with the offer being later rescinded or denied.

*“There's not a lot of information that is told to you about what you're entitled to... I think that needs to be kind of pushed*

*in my opinion... There's been a lot of financial difficulties, I'm not going to lie. I think that's the only problem I have, the money solves all my problems - Care experienced university student #24*

A number of students were initially content with the finance allocated, until personal circumstances, a funeral, council home rent, childcare, saw additional expenses incurred with no way to gain extra funding. The experience of significant financial hardship during university study and of local authorities not offering financial support that could adapt to individual situations where needed, led to increased stress for almost all participants who were at university.

*“If you're living on your own and it's not been your choice to do that, I do think that you should be more support around, like going into education like, like if I'm going to uni now, and doing a full on course I won't have time to work at the same time, and then manage like having my flat and all that, like there could be quite a bit of stuff to do at the same time, so I think there should be a bit more financial support, erm, for like, for care leavers going to uni or doing college or anything - Care experienced young person #16, applying for university*

It was of interest that young people in foster placements before entering university had fewer financial worries or problems in securing social services funding than those from residential care backgrounds. Whether this was due to foster families helping financially or advocating to social services to ensure their foster children received their full entitlement of financial support is unknown.

In addition to financial worries young people talked of the uncertainty of moves away from home, foster care, supported housing, YMCA and council property dwellings at the time of university entrance. As described in the previous





section, inconsistencies in support at this time continued to impact on existing tenancies and cause associated worry.

Aside from practical difficulties, several participants described the university experience as a time when emotional support networks were diminished to the point of acute loneliness.

*“My local authority’s financial support is good, but they don’t offer any other kind of support. Like they only support, see once a semester, um and I was like oh I’m really struggling, can you come and see me? And they’re just like why? I just wrote a whole email saying why, what do you mean why? - Care experienced university student #8*

*“You think you’re functioning and then you have a crash, most people usually have like, I’ve seen anyway, people have breakdowns at 21, 22, those ages when that, like the mental health service you’ve gone from not being a child anymore, now you’re treated as an adult and there’s so many things to unpack or you just see issues in terms of relationships and stuff. Even how to establish healthy relationship with people, that’s not really touched upon, things like attachment issues, abandonment issues, all those things are not really touched upon for care leavers and -those are things that a lot of us have those problems - Care experienced young person #14, attending university*

This problem was complicated by experiences of most established professional support networks for young people only operating during office hours. One participant called for a more holistic approach to working with care experienced young people.

However, not all care experienced young people have such poor experiences, multiple participants who attended one university were supported by dedicated people and a small team responsible for care experienced young people. These young people received consistent support around accommodation and finances, with counselling organised and coordinated.





# 6 DISCUSSION

To answer the research questions, the project sought to reaffirm and add to existing knowledge of care experienced young people's: expectations in relation to going to university, the process of applying to university and the support needed to transition and stay at these institutions.

In line with Alnatt (2020), the quantitative arm of the study showed that children in care were less likely than their counterparts to think that they would apply for university when they are older. Adjusted figures suggest that around 41.7% of those in care, and 47.0% of those care experienced in year 9 considered that they were likely to apply to go to university, as compared to 65.9% of the non-care experienced population. This relationship remained even when factors like their SEN status, history of school exclusions and household benefits were taken into account.

The quantitative analysis also indicated that the difference between the care experienced and non-care experienced young people persisted over time. The adjusted figures suggested that from all of the young people who at year 9 thought they would be likely to apply to university on leaving school, only 13.1% of those who were care experienced<sup>7</sup> had either gone to or were applying for higher education, as opposed to 41.4% of those who were not care experienced. Of those who had thought in year 9 that it was likely they would apply to go to university, 54.3% who were not care experienced were now at or applying for university as compared to 21.6% of those who were care experienced. Regression modelling suggested some of this might be because those care experienced young people fell into other high-risk groups such as having a history of school exclusion, being from households with low income, or having SEN. Despite this the analysis clearly showed that even when these important

factors were taken into account, the predicted probability of a child from care who had thought in year 9 they were likely to apply actually being at or applying for university was 0.31. In other words, care experienced young people who, when starting GCSE education thought it likely that they would apply to university later, were actually much less likely to do so than were their non-care experienced peers.

The qualitative arm of the study sought to understand the factors that lay behind these worrying levels of unfulfilled expectations, although while doing so the adverse experiences of care experienced children and young people (Lipkin, 2016; Harrison, 2017) must be remembered and the measures put in place to support the education of care experienced young people both in school and at higher levels of education (The Children Act 1989; The Children and Young Persons Act 2008; The Care Planning, Placement and Case Review (England) Regulations 2010, The Children and Families Act 2014; Children and Social Work Act 2017; The Care Leavers Covenant, 2018; Department for Education 2018a; Department for Education, 2018b) acknowledged. Certainly, the more positive experiences of some study participants in care, at school or university suggests such measures have positive effect when implemented fully, as is the way in which some linked these to their educational achievements. While this is to be applauded the experiences of the majority of the study participants suggest that, as yet, not

<sup>7</sup> Care experienced/or in care by year 9



all care experienced young people are benefitting fully.

When exploring experiences at school, it was of interest that the school age participants felt they were receiving sufficient support whereas care experienced university students tended to describe the support experienced at school as patchy and inconsistent. As found in a study based in Scotland (O'Neill et al, 2019), the most effective support in schools came from young people's and relations with key stakeholders. In this study this support often came from individual teachers rather than designated staff. While this finding suggests that this standard of care found in governmental guidance (DfE, 2018a) is not universally adhered to, it is possible that using teachers as mentors was a conscious choice when a teacher showed interest and a young person preferred to utilise this source of support rather than approaching designated support staff.

In relation to support from social services, the accounts of participants indicated that some were insufficiently supported while at school, especially during key events such as care entry, care moves and moving to semi-independent livings. There were instances of this having a serious effect on their education and by inference on held expectations to attend university. Where it occurred, the lack of support was often attributed to social service staff failing to give sufficient attention to young people's education. While the need to safeguard children and young people who enter care is paramount and must be given great priority, the young people felt this should not prevent their educational status and needs being carefully considered.

More positive academic trajectories tended to belong to young people who received sufficient support from foster carers. While the small sample is recognised, this finding bolsters evidence that indicates a strong relationship between good quality care support, expectations to attend university and subsequent attendance (Jackson et al, 2005). However, whether this link is mediated by the qualities of the children or young people or the foster care provided is

unclear. Greater confidence can be given to evidence around the effect of a poor environment for study as experienced in residential homes and when young people move to semi-independent living.

The study was also interested in university applications by care experienced young people. Despite recognition of the need for sufficient support for educational progress (O'Neill et al, 2019) and the recent Care Leavers Covenant (2018), a number of narratives described poor levels of targeted information and support in the process of university transition. Young people who had to find the information themselves linked this experience to a decreased motivation to continue with the application process. Accounts of inconsistent, unclear support were also found in descriptions of the move to university. A lack of support impacted heavily on care experienced young people during the transition; with worries over accommodation and finances emerging and causing considerable anxiety. Some students talked of additional dissonance between the support offered by local authorities and the actual support that materialised. Findings that some universities are filling this gap (Hauari et al, 2020) are supported by some study participant accounts. This is encouraging and supports calls for this help to be expanded across the university system.

The study also explored the support needed to stay at university. CSJ (2019) have summarised the support local authorities are expected to provide. This includes the financial costs of care leavers' higher education, including accommodation term time and holidays. The response of study participants indicated that this level of support was not provided universally. This finding may be linked to variability in the 'local offer; existent in diverse local authorities, although the age range of participant students (18 -27) may mean that 'local offers' did not apply to them. Whatever the cause, the inconsistency of the support offered by local authorities led to some young people living with anxieties about a place to live and money to support themselves throughout university with concerns often complicated by



lack of contact with key individuals whether in the local authority or at university. Young people also talked of the emotional support needed when moving away from home. Despite knowledge that this is essential for care experienced young people at university (O'Neill et al 2019) study responses showed that this is not being provided everywhere. Students at a university that provided what was perceived as good practical and emotional support had better experiences than those at different universities where the support was insufficient.

Finally, it has been observed that many care-experienced young people find the idea of university can trigger feelings of inadequacy and anxiety (Darroch, 2019). The younger participants supported this when describing the anxiety they experienced when contemplating going to university. For most these concerns revolved around leaving home and being separated from families. Although this is a common worry for young people leaving home (Seiffge-Krenke, 2016), it has been suggested that for care experienced young people this anxiety may be linked to previous negative experiences of placement moves (O'Neill et al., 2019). This finding suggests a need for sustained conversations about the concept of university, reassurance of the nature of support, and positive relationships with important others throughout university attendance.

## Conclusions and recommendations

The study confirms that care experienced young people have lower expectations of attending university than those who have never entered care. A relatively high proportion of care experienced young people believe they will apply to university when they begin to study for public examinations in school years 9/10 but are not in higher education when 19/20 years old. While this trend exists in the general population the lack of progress is much higher amongst the care experienced population.

The study identifies some of the complex factors influencing expectations and achievements in

education, and the potential influence of carers, local authorities and university bodies. Supporting journeys to university is a complicated process for all children, the study highlights that providing sufficient support for care experienced young people demands the interweaving of practical, aspirational and emotional support.

Many policy and guidance measures have been put in place, particularly in recent years. Although the small nature of the qualitative arm of the study is acknowledged related findings suggest that when enacted these can make a great difference to young people's expectations and achievement. However, like other recent studies our findings suggest that some care experienced young people are still not receiving the support required.

These findings lead to a number of practice recommendations. Even when there is evidence of measures being implemented, the experiences of some young people elicit a call for key stakeholders to go the extra mile as and when needed

The support for the educational progress of care experienced children and young people offered within schools and available from designated staff must be easily accessible and tailored to the specific needs of each child

This support should be provided and prioritised whenever feasible, even when a child's safeguarding needs are urgent:

- Support for the process of applying to university should be supplied by all key stakeholders who provide corporate parenting. In schools specific support for care experienced young people should always be available
- Local authorities should be aware of the educational needs of young people when in care and ensure that their home environments are such that they allow them to focus and concentrate on study





- Local authorities should ensure that young people are aware of all sources of financial, practical and emotional support when transitioning to and living at university, and further should make sure these are accessible and provide the help needed.
- All universities should be aware of the needs of care experienced young people and of how the provision of sufficient support can enable more care experienced young people to transition to and remain at university
- All universities should be encouraged to provide the high levels of support that facilitate young people attend university and stay there

It is also important to identify the limitations of the study. The quantitative analysis was not able to explore the influence of educational

qualifications, namely GCSEs as this measure was not made available during the study time frame. While the small size of the qualitative sample has been recognized above, it is also possible that the experienced school pupils and students willing to engage with a research activity may be more engaged with schooling and academia than others. This report therefore cannot make claims regarding the barriers to university for care experienced young people who disengaged from education at key stages.

Finally, as acknowledged earlier, the data set used was obtained at a time when young people could leave secondary education at 16. Raising the age since then may have affected the expectation of all young people, including care experienced young people in relation to achieving higher education.





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# 8 APPENDICES

## Appendix A: Recoding and defining variables in next steps data

This study used data from Sweeps 1-4 and 7 of the Next Steps Data. Table A1 shows the numbers of young people in each of these sweeps.

Table A1. Number of participants in each Sweep of the data

Sweep	Age of Participants	Total Sample size of Sweep
One	13/14	15,770
Two	14/15	13,539
Three	15/16	12,439
Four	16/17	11,449
Seven	19/20	8,494

### Variables used in the Analysis

#### Care Experience

Information about whether or not someone is care experienced is taken from an interview with the main parent at Sweep 1 of the study. Parents were asked, "Since (name of sample member) was born, has he/she ever been in care in any of the arrangements shown below?" This was followed

by the list of different types of care arrangements (See Table A2). Of those who responded to this question 256 indicated that the child had been in some sort of care arrangement and 13,808 indicated that they had never been in care. In the remaining cases either the parent did not answer that section, or the parent did not answer that question or know if the child had previously been in care. See Table A2.

Table A2. Responses to whether the child had previously been in care

Response	n
Never been in care	13,808
Indication that the child had been in one or more care arrangement	256
Don't know	15
Don't want to answer	43
Main Parent not interviewed	257
Main Parent refused CASI Section	356
Main Parent unable to complete CASI Section	1035
Total	15,770



The numbers of responses that indicated that the young person had been in the following care arrangements are shown in Table A3. (Some

young people had been in more than one care arrangement therefore this totals more than 256)

**Table A3. Types of care experienced by young people in the sample**

Type of Care Arrangement	n
With foster parents	206
In a young people's home	14
In local authority care, but remaining with own parents	27
Placed for adoption	50
In local authority care in some other arrangement	42

For the analysis it was decided to exclude from the care experienced group those who had had care experience but only because they were either adopted, or technically they were in care but had remained with their own parents,

Of the 256 young people 25 fell into this category, leaving a sample of 231. The parents who had indicated that the child had ever been in care, were

also asked whether the child was in care now. Of the 231 young people who were care experienced at Sweep 1, there was an indication that 84 were currently in care at that time. The survey suffered from attrition, with fewer respondents at subsequent Sweeps. The numbers who were still in the study at the respective sweeps, in each of the groups are shown in Table A4.

**Table A4. Numbers of children in care or care experienced at Sweep 1 remaining in the study at Sweeps 1 to 7**

Sweep	In Care at Sweep 1	Care Experienced, but not in care at Sweep 1	Never been in care	Parent did not answer or did not know	Total Sample size of Sweep
One	84	147	13,891	1,648	15,770
Two	59	125	12,033	1,322	13,539
Three	51	114	11,082	1,192	12,439
Four	46	101	10,242	1,060	11,449
Seven	22	68	7,672	732	8,494

### Likelihood of Applying to go to University

The Next Steps dataset asks a number of questions at different Sweeps relating to the young person's expectations with respect to going to Higher Education. At each Sweep from 1 to 4, the young people were asked "How likely

do you think it is that you will ever apply to go to university to do a degree? Would you say it's... Very likely, Fairly likely, Not very likely, Not at all likely or Don't know". The responses Very likely and Fairly likely were recoded together to form a likely category.



## Attending Higher Education

Sweep 7 was carried out in 2010, when the young people were aged 19/20. It included a variable which was created to show whether or not the young person had been in higher education at this

age, including those that had applied for higher education but not yet started. Table A5 shows the proportions of those remaining in the sample at this stage who were in higher education or were applying for it.

**Table A5. Numbers and Proportions of Young People in the Study in or applying for Higher Education at Sweep 7**

	n	%
Refused to answer or don't know	6	0.06
In higher education	4,298	49.5
Accepted higher education offer to start in 2010 or 2011	119	1.37
Applied for higher education to start in 2010 or 2011	50	0.58
Not applying to higher education	4,209	48.48
Total	8682	100

The variable was recoded to form a binary variable that indicated whether someone was either at higher education or planning to go (had applied and either had offer to start or were awaiting the results of the application) or were not applying. Those who refused to answer or didn't know were coded as missing.



## Appendix B: Tables relating to quantitative analysis

### Young People's Expectations at Sweep 4

Table B1. Expectations for two years' time

	Care Experienced				Not care experienced			
	Non weighted or adjusted		Weighted and adjusted for sample design		Non weighted or adjusted		Weighted and adjusted for sample design	
	n	%	%	CI	n	%	%	CI
Apprenticeship or similar	11	7.9	8.3	[4.3, 15.6]	781	7.8	8.4	[7.7, 9.1]
In a full-time job	57	41.0	43.3	[34.4, 52.7]	2791	27.7	31.9	[30.6, 33.3]
Studying full-time for qualification	53	38.1	31.2	[23.4, 40.3]	5591	55.5	49.9	[48.4, 51.5]
Other	18	12.9	17.1	[10.0, 27.7]	905	9.0	9.8	[9.1, 10.6]

Pearson Chi<sup>2</sup> test, P = 0.002

Table B2. Response at Sweep 4 to: I don't need to have a university degree to get the kind of job I want to

	Care experienced by Sweep 1				Not care experienced by Sweep 1			
	Non weighted		Weighted		Non weighted		Weighted	
	n	%	%	CI	n	%	%	CI
Strongly Agree	8	12.5	12.4	[6.0, 24.0]	869	16.0	18.3	[17.0, 19.6]
Agree	22	34.4	37.6	[26.4, 50.4]	1,692	31.2	33.0	[31.7, 34.5]
Disagree	15	23.4	17.6	[9.9, 29.3]	1,474	27.2	25.9	[24.6, 27.3]
Strongly Disagree	10	15.6	12.1	[6.4, 21.8]	949	17.5	14.9	[13.6, 16.1]
Don't know	9	14.1	20.2	[10.9, 34.4]	437	8.1	7.9	[7.1, 8.8]

\* adjusted figures were weighted, and adjusted for PSU, but not strata as there were responses from a single sampling unit  
Pearson Chi<sup>2</sup> test, P=0.009



**Table B3. Response at Sweep 4 to: I need to have a university degree to get the kind of job I want to**

	Care experienced by Sweep 1				Not care experienced by Sweep 1			
	Non weighted		Weighted		Non weighted		Weighted	
	n	%	%	CI	n	%	%	CI
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	17	23.9	16.6	[9.0, 28.4]	1,287	28.5	25.2	[23.3, 27.3]
<b>Agree</b>	14	19.7	19.9	[10.8, 33.8]	1,175	26.0	24.8	[23.4, 26.3]
<b>Disagree</b>	22	31.0	30.8	[21.3, 42.3]	1,275	28.2	30.5	[28.8, 32.3]
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	16	22.5	28.4	[18.7, 40.7]	530	11.7	13.8	[12.5, 15.2]
<b>Don't know</b>	2	2.8	4.3	[1.1, 15.8]	253	5.6	5.7	[5.0, 6.5]

\* adjusted figures were weighted, and adjusted for PSU, but not strata as there were responses from a single sampling unit  
Pearson Chi<sup>2</sup> test, P=0.034

**Table B4. The best jobs go to people who have been to university**

	Not care experienced by Sweep 1				Not care experienced by Sweep 1			
	Non weighted		Weighted		Non weighted		Weighted	
	n	%	%	CI	n	%	%	CI
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	29	21.5	21.8	[14.8, 30.9]	1780	17.9	15.8	[15.0, 16.6]
<b>Agree</b>	32	23.7	21.3	[14.5, 30.3]	3658	36.7	35.7	[34.6, 36.8]
<b>Disagree</b>	54	40.0	38.9	[29.9, 48.6]	3332	33.5	35.4	[34.3, 36.5]
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	12	8.9	9.9	[5.6, 16.8]	826	8.3	9.3	[8.7, 10.0]
<b>Don't know</b>	8	5.9	8.1	[3.2, 19.1]	359	3.6	3.8	[3.4, 4.3]

Pearson Chi<sup>2</sup> test, P=0.026

**Table B5. Most of my friends are planning on going to university**

	Not care experienced by Sweep 1				Not care experienced by Sweep 1			
	Non weighted		Weighted		Non weighted		Weighted	
	n	%	%	CI	n	%	%	CI
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	13	9.8	8.1	[4.0, 15.7]	2069	20.8	18.4	[17.2, 19.7]
<b>Agree</b>	33	24.8	18.3	[12.4, 26.1]	3709	37.2	34.8	[33.6, 36.0]
<b>Disagree</b>	49	36.8	39.9	[31.1, 49.3]	2714	27.2	30.4	[29.1, 31.7]
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	17	12.8	15.5	[9.8, 23.8]	585	5.9	7.0	[6.3, 7.7]
<b>Don't know</b>	21	15.8	18.3	[11.5, 27.8]	889	8.9	9.4	[8.8, 10.2]

Pearson Chi<sup>2</sup> test, P=0.000





**Table B6. People like me don't go to university**

	Not care experienced by Sweep 1				Not care experienced by Sweep 1			
	Non weighted		Weighted		Non weighted		Weighted	
	n	%	%	CI	n	%	%	CI
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	9	6.7	7.6	[3.6, 15.1]	317	3.2	3.8	[3.3,4.2]
<b>Agree</b>	14	10.4	14.5	[8.6, 23.3]	945	9.5	11.0	[10.2, 11.8]
<b>Disagree</b>	67	50.0	48.8	[39.2, 58.5]	4428	44.6	45.1	[44.0, 46.3]
<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	33	24.6	19.0	[13.0, 26.9]	3647	36.7	33.9	[32.6,35.2]
<b>Don't know</b>	11	8.2	10.2	[5.7, 17.8]	598	6.0	6.3	[5.7, 6.8]

Pearson Chi<sup>2</sup> test, P=0.008

## Binary Logistic Regression Models

### Regression Model 1

Likelihood of young person indicating they were likely to apply for Higher Education was used as the outcome measure in a binary logistic model with four explanatory variables:

1. The young person's care experience – this was split into two three categories: Young person in care at Sweep 1, young person care experienced but not in care at Sweep 1, and young person not care experienced. Not care experienced was used as the reference category.
2. An indication of SEN present at Sweep 1. No SEN as reference category.
3. Young Person's Sex is Male, Female is reference category.
4. Indication that the young person had ever been temporarily excluded from school. No exclusion is the reference category.
5. Indication that either the young person's main parent or their partner is in receipt of benefits for low income or unemployment. No mention of benefits was the reference category.

**Table B7. Odds Ratios, Likelihood of young people indicating they think it is likely they will apply to university when other risk factors taken into account**

	Odds Ratio		Regression Coefficient		P>t
	OR	95% CI	Coef.	95% CI	
<b>In care Sweep 1</b>	0.54	[0.33, 0.89]	-0.619	[-1.117, -0.121]	0.015
<b>Care experienced Sweep 1</b>	0.72	[0.47, 1.11]	-0.323	[-0.746, 0.100]	0.134
<b>SEN</b>	0.39	[0.35, 0.44]	-0.933	[-1.044, -0.821]	0.000
<b>Sex</b>	0.88	[0.80, 0.97]	-0.127	[-0.225, -0.029]	0.011
<b>Exclusion</b>	0.48	[0.42, 0.55]	-0.732	[-0.865, -0.599]	0.000
<b>Benefits</b>	0.57	[0.52, 0.62]	-0.563	[-0.646, -0.481]	0.000
<b>Constant</b>	3.53	[3.20, 3.89]	1.261	[1.162, 1.359]	0.000



## Regression Model 2

The independent variable was whether the young person was in or applying for higher education at W7. Two predictor variables were added:

- Whether or not the young person was care experienced at W1. Not care experienced was the reference category.
- Whether or not the young person considered that they were likely to apply for higher education at Sweep 1. Thinking they were not likely to apply was the reference category.
- An indication of SEN present at Sweep 1. No SEN as reference category
- Young Person's Sex is Male, Female is reference category.
- Indication that the young person had ever been temporarily excluded from school, by Sweep 1. No exclusion is the reference category.
- Indication that either the young person's main parent or their partner is in receipt of benefits for low income or unemployment at Sweep 1. No mention of benefits was the reference category.

**Table B8. Odds Ratios and Regression Coefficients, Predictor of Being in or having applied for Higher Education at W7**

	Odds Ratio		Regression Coefficient		P>t
	OR	95% CI	Coef.	95% CI	
<b>Young Person thought they were likely to apply for HE</b>	5.59	[4.93, 6.34]	1.722	[1.596, 1.847]	0.000
<b>In Care or Care Experienced</b>	0.35	[0.18, 0.67]	-1.053	[-1.710, -0.397]	0.002
<b>SEN</b>	0.48	[0.42, 0.56]	-0.724	[-0.872, -0.577]	0.000
<b>Sex</b>	0.86	[0.76, 0.96]	-0.156	[-0.274, -0.037]	0.010
<b>Exclusion</b>	0.26	[0.20, 0.34]	-1.346	[-1.622, -1.071]	0.000
<b>Benefits</b>	0.42	[0.37, 0.47]	-0.871	[-0.995, -0.746]	0.000
<b>Constant</b>	0.37	[0.32, 0.42]	-1.001	[-1.144, -0.858]	0.000



## Appendix C: Interview schedule

### Interview schedule

(Introductions/ confidentiality- pseudonyms /Dictaphone/ option to read transcript and final thesis, consent forms)

#### 1.1 General information

Question	Prompts
Can you tell me a little bit about yourself now?	Name Age DoB Home
And when you entered care	Age Care status

#### 1.2 Care experience

Question	Prompts
Can you tell me about your experience of the care system?	Tell me about who you live with and have lived with and for how long?

#### 1.3 Education aspirations

Question	Prompts
Can you tell me about your schooling growing up in care?	Do you feel that your education has been a focus during your time in care?? Would you say your attendance was good, poor, average? Were you ever excluded from school? Suspended? What support did you get from school/social worker? Did your foster parents or guardians help you do the best you can in school? Did your carers help with homework? Did your carers/social workers/teacher acknowledge or praise educational achievement?



<b>Did you have any ambitions to stay at school or go to college after 16?</b>	<p>Did your carers/social workers/teachers encourage you to stay in education?</p> <p>Did you discuss this with carers/teachers/ social workers?</p> <p>Do you have any interests or hobbies outside of school that you consider helped your education?</p>
<b>Did you consider going to university?</b>	<p>Were you encouraged to discuss Higher Education and given advice on how to achieve this goal?</p> <p>Did your social worker take an interest in your education and talk to you about higher education?</p> <p>Do you have any friends that went to or want to go to university?</p>

#### 1.4 The application process

Question	Prompts
<b>Did you know about the process of applying to university?</b>	<p>UCAS forms</p> <p>Disclosing care leaver status on your UCAS form</p> <p>Open days</p> <p>Forms of support available</p>
<b>What type of support might you have needed if you were considering university?</b>	<p>Who would you have liked this support to be from?</p> <p>Would they attend any open days with you?</p> <p>Have they given you advice on the financial implications of attending university?</p>
<b>How do you feel about the idea of attending university?</b>	

#### 1.5 Level of Study

Question	Prompts
<b>What level of study did you complete? GCSE's or any other courses?</b>	<p>What are you studying at school/college?</p>



## 1.6 Attitudes to university

Question	Prompts
What do you think the challenges are for young people in care when they attend higher education?	Personal? Practical? Financial?
What do you think are the main educational/school challenges that young people from a care background experience?	Is it help getting to school? Balancing the home and school work responsibilities Feeling like they have less help at home than others not in their situation Primary? Secondary? Post-16? Higher education?

## 1.7 Close

Is there anything else you want to say about your school experience and how links with your home life?

Thank you for taking part.



What Works *for*  
**Children's  
Social Care**

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