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# GETTING IT RIGHT



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The research team at Thomas Coram Research Unit, UCL [Ins4lch.cn/research2080](https://ins4lch.cn/research2080)



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



institutional arrangements, and current and former students' experience, to encourage,

such as the breadth of institutional arrangements required to support disadvantaged

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England and sought to capture the institutional arrangements and services in place at HEIs to support students from care and other 'risk' backgrounds. Theoretical frameworks and concepts such as Bourdieu's capital and habitus were operationalised in the third phase which was in-depth qualitative

where care experienced former and current students worked with researchers to co-

be issues of integration into an unfamiliar cultural world, supporting care experienced

practices designed to know who the care experienced student population is and deliver

institutional 'habitus' for care experienced students.



– Enabling an informed choice referred to the importance of comprehensive and

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and had to research HE institutions and courses without help.

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unintentional. More work is required to ensure disclosure is not seen as stigmatising but as a positive measure that will help care experienced students during their time

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well as academic, social, emotional and mental health support.

–

in new surroundings and circumstances.

–

students move into their accommodation. This can exacerbate feelings of loneliness

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awareness or understanding of students' current or emerging needs and places the onus on the student to seek out help.

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gone home.







- Belonging serves as an important motivator and protective factor for student

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## Finance

–

outside term time. Such institutional review should feed into reviews of student

## Accommodation

–

move into their student accommodation and link them with a named contact to help prior to their arrival.


–

students therefore HEIs should consider allowing care experienced (and other WP)

WP students, who might act as mentors or 'buddies'.

–

– HEIs should ensure that care experienced students can remain in their student



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personal tutor, academic programme leader with care experienced students

hasn't sought support or seems to be ok.

### **While at university (continued)**

#### **Personal and academic support**

- personal tutor, academic programme leader with care experienced students is
- HEIs should ensure that there is streamlined communication and inter professional housing, programme leaders, lecturers, and personal tutors.
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# INTRODUCTION



# Introduction

practical assistance to care leavers in education up to the age of 25. This measure,

participation rates have plateaued at about six percent compared to around 50 percent

completion and subsequent livelihoods.

support, which carries restrictive criteria relating to the duration of time in care and age

on later life chances (Cameron et al., 2018). Successive studies carried out at Thomas

to the age of 25, all measures aimed at improving access to higher education (Jackson awarded to universities that met criteria related to supporting care experienced students. Withdrawn in 2014, Buttle UK assessed that the Mark's aim of raising awareness, and provision, in universities, had been achieved. Over its lifetime, 114 universities and 85

in further and higher education are similar across European countries (Jackson and Cameron 2014). These barriers are academic, practical and personal. Even now, despite



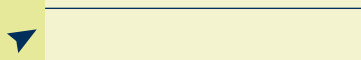


A note on terminology

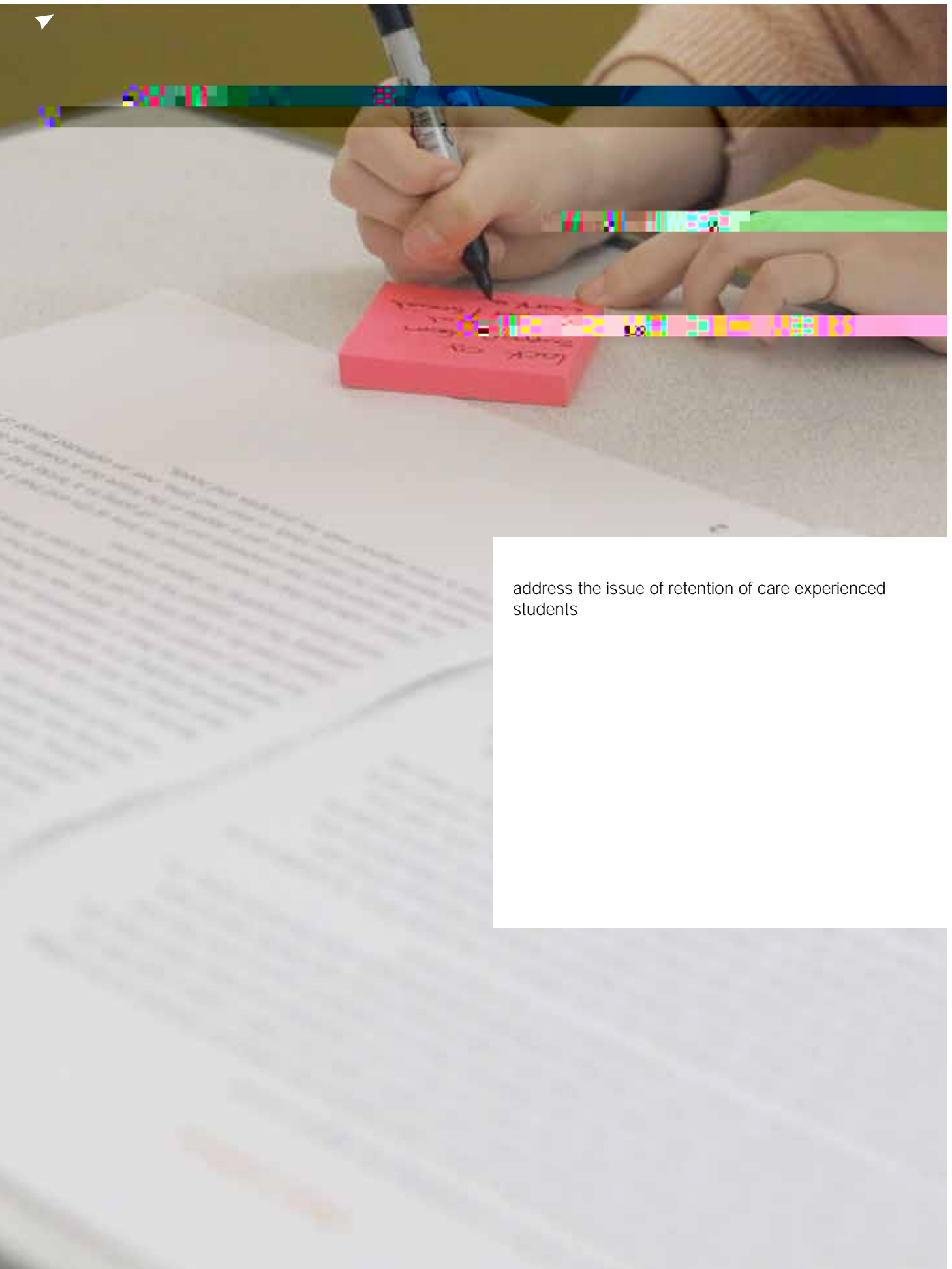
The structure of this report

raises issues of institutional variation and fragmentation of support services and add to





# METHODOLOGY



address the issue of retention of care experienced students



Part one involved a review of relevant recent literature on the experiences of underrepresented groups in higher

students. A search of the literature was conducted using

capture the institutional arrangements and services in place at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to support students from care and other risk backgrounds. The

frameworks underpinning research in this area that sought

arising out of these frameworks, which have been utilised to understand the experiences of students from

to explore and understand the experiences of care experienced students in higher education.

‘named contact’ for care leavers listed on the Propel

Become (151 HEIs). We sent named contacts information about the research and invited them to participate in

to support student retention. Several reminder emails were sent over the following weeks and months and the

extra time for completion and to maximise the response rate. We anticipated, and it proved to be the case, that no single job role had oversight of all the information that

information requested and examples of practice sought in

participated, and there was much missing information in

to support student retention. Several reminder emails





widening participation teams, and all “named contacts” for care leavers listed in the



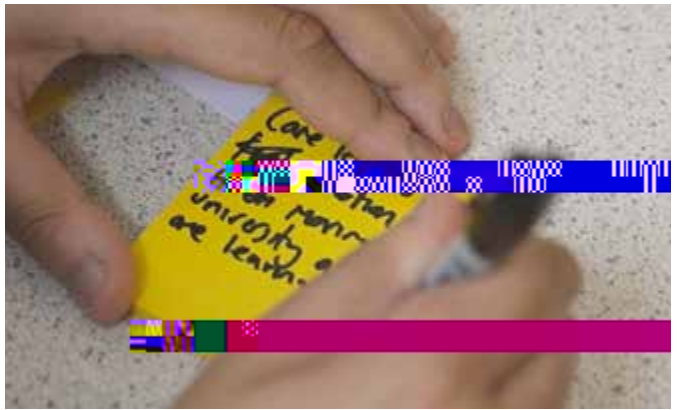
## Participatory analysis workshop

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# LITERATURE REVIEW



the background of non-traditional students and the world of higher education and middle class culture – or 'habitus'



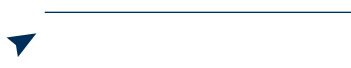






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# SURVEY FINDINGS



support care experienced students. We sought detail on  
responded and because of this poor response rate and

How HEIs identify care leavers and other at risk and disadvantaged groups  
students, and those in the other Widening Participation (WP) categories we listed



Where a care experienced student has disclosed their status, how is this information used?

The most common response was to share information about care status with specialist


Do policies for widening participation include measures to support student retention?

place to support student retention were:

**Academic:**

**Practical:**

**Personal/health related:**



## Measures to support student participation in university life

or care experienced students. One HEI did report that ongoing consultation took place with care experienced students and another HEI operated mentoring for these students.

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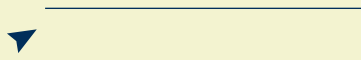
Joint working to address retention and needs of WP and/or care experienced students

Nine HEIs reported that their WP team worked with other departments on student joint working:

- act as a link to the WP team.
- 
- 
- 
- additional support.
- 
- A Care Experienced and Estranged Students Working Group comprising of WP, Student Funding, Student Support Wellbeing and Accommodation, a care experienced and estranged student rep.
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- A WP produced guide to working with care experienced students for
- 
- 
- 
- Lack of partnership working between relevant departments e.g. WP, Student
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LIVED  
LIFES AT  
UNIVERSITY

with three interview participants, and two non-interview participants – who served as additional validators of our interpretation of the data (see Chapter 3). The themes are:

asked questions of the data such as: What facilitates and enables care experienced

their HE experience?

experienced major disruption throughout their lives through, for example, changes to

demonstrated enormous resilience in overcoming multiple disruptions and obstacles

a positive and successful experience in HE. For this reason, disruption is a red thread

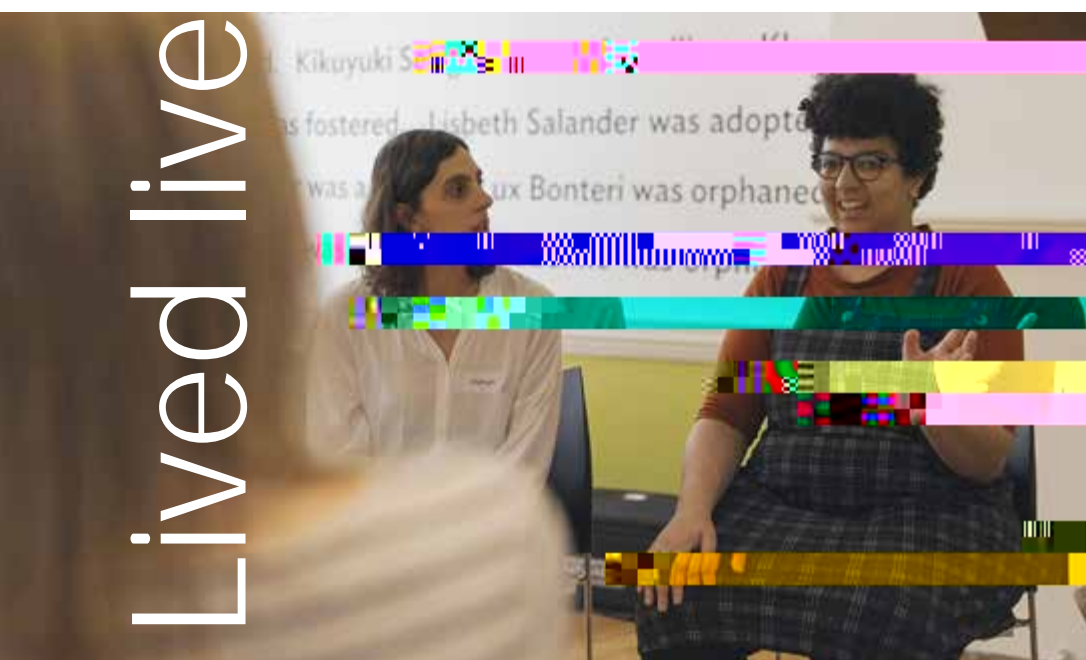




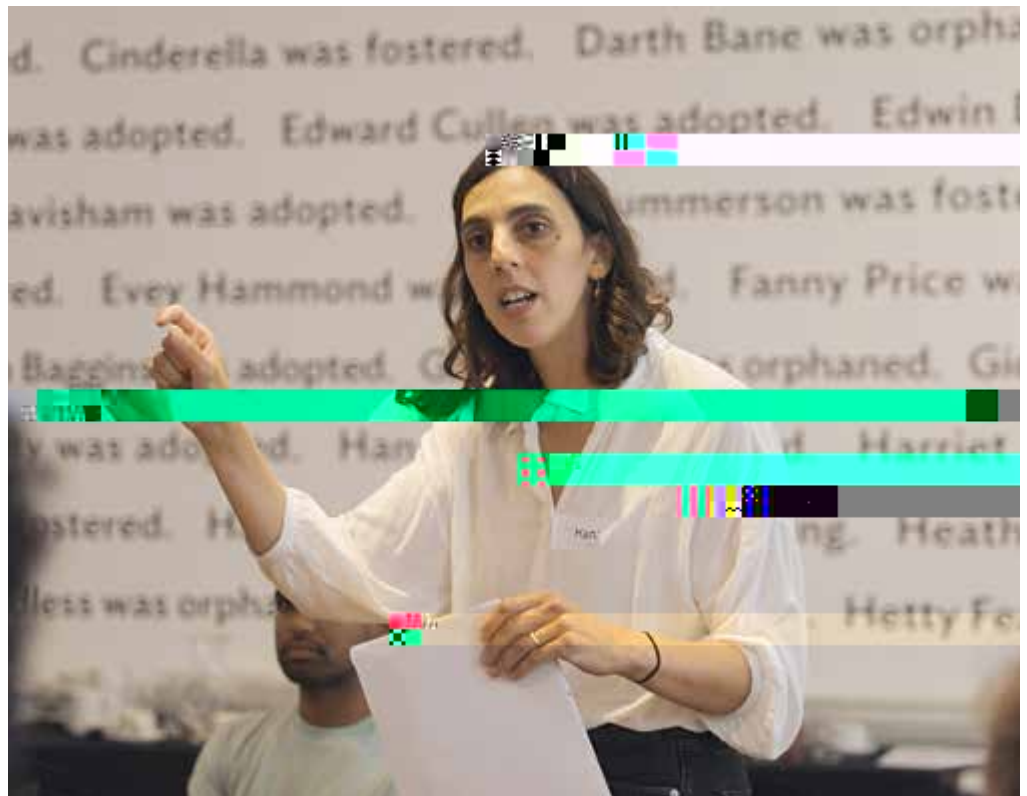
Table 5.1 introduces the research participants. Three took part in the interview as well as the workshop, four did the range of subjects.

**Table 5.1**

Allison	Yes	Yes	
Selena	Yes	Yes	
Pravir	Yes	Yes	
Michael	Yes	No	
Ruth	Yes	No	
Laila	Yes	No	
Isabella	Yes	No	
Amar	No	Yes	
Emma	No	Yes	







### Enabling an informed choice (continued)

of some care experienced students to admit their care status and the potential consequences of non-disclosure

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I disclosed, they have a £5500 bursary for care leavers that they don't actually announce because they're worried that people will just try and take advantage ... apparently there was loads of money put aside for these people but it wasn't publicised and the uni didn't think they had any students who needed it, so the money wasn't going to them. It wasn't advertised anywhere, no way for care leavers to know anything about it and in the meantime care Leavers are regularly



where care experienced students still want the involvement of their LA. This helps to facilitate a seamless transition


should be a principle in their communication with those responsible for, or caring about, particular students' wellbeing, including local authorities.

contact with their personal advisor in home local authorities. For them, consistent and holistic support from their HEI

HE experience.

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thing after a while ... I mean you've got your uni friends but it's not the same. I think I saw my PA once the whole time I was down there, which wasn't good". (Laila, interview participant)



## Continuity from the start

Another reported having to move with the help of a stranger because there was no-

it took him much longer to unpack and settle in than for other students which in turn

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such conversations.

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“I had a very close group of friends but they’ve graduated, so the friends I have now are more sort of ... a bit more casual, like they don’t know very much about me but we go out and do this, that and the other. ..So I haven’t told them. It’s something I try to leave

kept asking me like ‘Oh why haven’t you called your parents yet,

they’re just like ... like obviously not mean to you, but over and over again ... and so eventually it was like quite early on that I just sort of gave a bare bones outline so that that would stop. And people were very understanding, just not something they’d encountered before I think.” (Ruth, interview participant)

and relationships with existing students (including current care experienced or WP

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“it’s important to have at least a few people that you know at the university before you arrive maybe. So like I was introduced even via email like to a few key people – that you have some personal support and you know them before you get there”.





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## Continuity of support in the 'business as usual'

communication. Even when a student has disclosed their care status, this information

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"I don't think any of my lecturers knew that I was a Care Leaver and my personal tutor didn't know til I mentioned it in my 2nd year and before then I don't think they knew, it wasn't passed on to them."  
(Emma, workshop participant)

inadequate awareness or understanding of students' current or emerging needs. It also places the onus on the student to ask for and seek out help rather than the HEI being

of care applies to students, to what extent it is followed through, and the boundaries

Care experienced students can be reluctant to ask for support or additional resources

stem from their childhood experiences.

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"I think knowing when to ask for help is like my biggest weakness in life because you don't want to seem ... not stupid but that you can't do it yourself." (Isabella, interview participant)

for support. This can cause disruption to their academic and social life and to settling in between them and their non-care experienced peers.



## An open door policy

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decide to drop out of uni cos they can't cope with all the housing pressures, all the course pressures on top of that, you don't have as much network support as many other people do...a lot of anxiety issues, we have our families to deal with and other things." (Selena, interview and workshop participant)

might also allow for disclosure of care status once a care experienced student has highlights how important it is that HEIs ensure trusting relationships are built between

## Outside term times

### Christmas break:

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"In the holidays it's like, what do I do? Cos everyone goes home and kinda like, well I could go to my foster carers but I don't really want to so then you end up staying, like I ended up staying at uni a lot but then there's no-one around and it's all just a bit weird, like wandering around campus alone for like 3 weeks...It would be good if there was somewhere they could go or like some kind of group where like for people, not just for care leavers, but people in general who are there for the holidays and don't have anywhere to go to... like some uni organised events". (Emma, workshop participant)

Other practical matters were a concern outside of term time. Financial provision and

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“it was just like not having that freedom of just being able to see my friends or just go home when I want to go home, sort of thing”.  
(Laila, interview participant)

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things that people don’t realise like travelling back home to see your friends because they are the important people in your life as a care leaver or for emergencies like if your phone breaks.”  
(Allison, interview and workshop participant)

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“compared to a parent, they can lend you some money or they give it out of unconditional love you know. And the fact that you don’t have to worry about it. But with the whole system of a care leaver and the whole government funding it’s limited....there was a time when I ran out of money, I had to wait until oh next week or the week or I’d go through the donated food bins”. (Allison, interview and workshop participant)

might exist and how this might be accessed.

of what happens during the long summer break. Accommodation costs took up a

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“my university has very steep housing prices in the summer, it would have cost me £6000 for housing throughout the summer so with your student loan you basically don’t have anything left...housing prices actually rise during the summer and the cheapest accommodation choices are not even open for renting during the summer”.  
(Selena, interview and workshop participant)

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## Continuity of support in the transition out of HE

that of post-graduate degrees such as Masters' degrees. Some participants reported

could take a much more pro-active role in helping care experienced students to access relevant work experience, to network and to access good career opportunities:

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"people use family and other contacts to get jobs and opportunities that wouldn't be like available to people who might not have family links and I think care leavers, if they don't have close family links

they otherwise might have been able to like jump into and that also applies to people from working class backgrounds or people who are







then you have to explain, they go to their manager and then ...” (Ruth, interview participant)



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## Progressing through university

place. For care experienced students the transition can be more pronounced and occurs alongside a set of personal age (Stein 2012).

exchange programmes etc.

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“Sometimes you have to choose between paying your rent and seeing your friends and having to life ....” (Amar, workshop participant)

this is understandable as part of due diligence, it does present an additional barrier for care experienced students that

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“If I needed extra money for you know holidays like getting back and that, they would do that. But

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"I still feel like I belong in terms of the university [...] I just feel



## Fostering relationships with peers

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“So obviously in UCAS you would note down that you’re a care leaver so the team will contact you, and they will say you know so and so’s your spokesperson, if you need any questions they’ll introduce you. I think she introduced me during Freshers Week and said you know come along to this, I’d love to meet you and I did. So

was good. So very early on. Yeah very very early on. And I guess I’m who I need to speak to.” (Michael, interview participant)

While Widening Participation teams do facilitate groups for care experienced students,

into higher education.

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“I think the fact that people doing undergrads here who start at 21 done other degrees or jobs or whatever, but it’s not like ‘I’ve left my more like ‘I’m normal’.” [Ruth, interview participant]

campus, putting in place arrangements where care experienced students are mentored faculties and departments.

of activities that are appropriate for care experienced and non-care experience students

circumstances, parental support and social capital between care experienced students and their peers.

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“I went to a Russell Group Uni so a lot of the students are more higher class, so they’d always look down on people in care so they

thought you were normal’ and I was like ‘well yeah I am normal!’ I don’t think people even realise, like when she said that I don’t think she even realised what she was saying.” (Emma, workshop participant)

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“There is this kind of social pressure as well, especially if you go to an elite university where people have much more money than you do and you want to kind of participate in all the social activities etc, and you can’t because you can only provide for the basics.”  
(Selena, interview and workshop participant)

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like Tory, but those kind of views where like if you don’t have money you’re not really worth anything. So just to socialise with other

people, so it all kind of had very ... like views of people who didn’t have very much money, as ‘Oh it’s your fault, like you must have done something wrong’ ‘Like well just work then, just go and get some money’.” (Emma, workshop participant)

Some care experienced students were much more aware of the potential social

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“I found the city too big and it was all too much, and all this sort of students, and the central student services, but it’s sort of like turn up, get assigned a person ... like going to a bank or something – it’s quite impersonal. I had a tutor who was lovely, but quite an elderly Physics professor and not necessarily someone I’d go to with my problems”. (Ruth, interview participant)

environment where care experienced students can succeed in their studies. This proactive and responsive approach is also important in creating an environment where

intellectual belonging (based on connections through shared interests), but also in

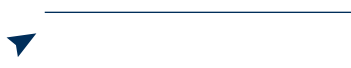
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# MOVING FORWARD

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE



# Moving forward

to access and integrate into universities as one of several under-represented groups.

that last from application to graduation. Universities are large and complex organisations

the habitus of universities and care experienced students are mismatched. The role of  
and pastoral leaders, among others, is to reach across the cultural capital gap between

recommended better information, more personalised support and more comprehensive

Universities are large and complex  
organisations and care experienced

friends to help inform and fall back  
on, are faced with a daunting list of





When applying

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## Finance

- 

## Accommodation

- 

move into their student accommodation and link them with a named contact to help prior to their arrival.

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students therefore HEIs should consider allowing care experienced (and other WP)

WP students, who might act as mentors or 'buddies'.

- 

- HEIs should ensure that care experienced students can remain in their student

## Personal and academic support

- 

student hasn't sought support or seems to be ok.

- HEIs should ensure that there is streamlined communication and inter professional

housing, programme leaders, lecturers, and personal tutors.

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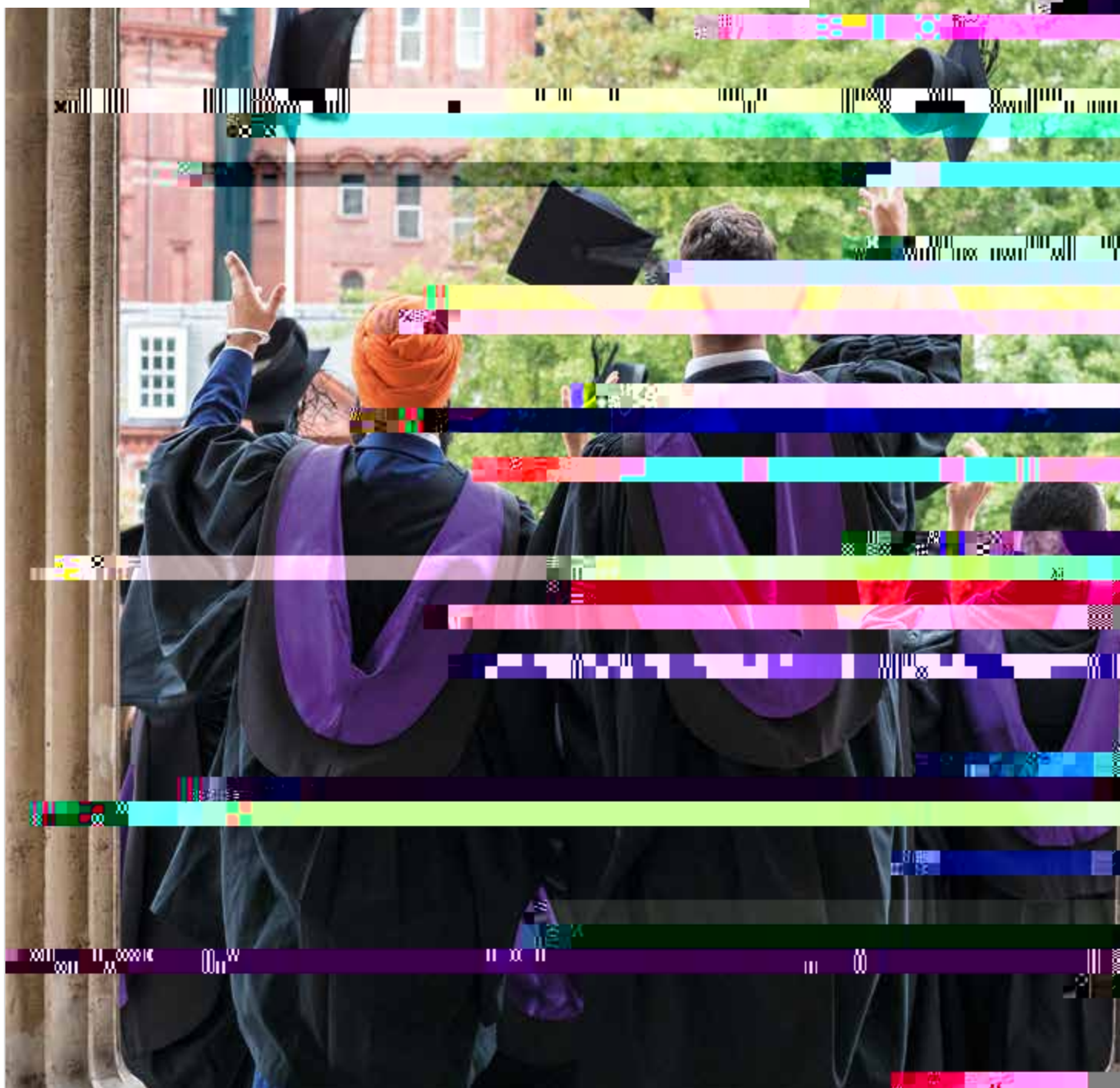
individual needs. Where a student has disclosed their status, HEIs need to meet with

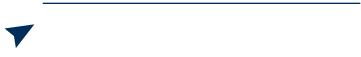
- HEIs should consult with their existing care experienced students on all aspects

of improvement.

- Academics and academic departments should reach out to students, facilitating networks associated with their academic interests, hosting events, forming sub-

- Care experienced students should not be disadvantaged at the postgraduate stage. HEIs should consider introducing policies and provision that support care experienced students undertaking postgraduate degrees.
- Universities need to facilitate networking amongst care experienced students







Jackson, S., Ajayi, S. and Quigley, M., 2005. Going to university from care. Institute of Education, University of London.

Masika, R. and Jones, J., 2016. Building student belonging and engagement: insights into higher education students' experiences of participating and learning together. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 21(2), pp.138-150.

**THOMA**