



Going to university from care

Sonia Jackson, Sarah Ajayi and Margaret Quigley

Summary of findings and recommendations

INTRODUCTION

This is a summary of the final report of the *By Degrees* action research project, commissioned by the Frank Buttle Trust to explore the experiences of care leavers (about one in a hundred) who continue into higher education.

The principal aim of the project was to use this evidence to advise government, local authorities, universities and colleges in order to:

- increase the numbers of young people in care going to university
- enable them to make the most of their time there and to complete their courses successfully
- help local authorities to fulfil their obligations as corporate parents
- raise awareness among social workers, teachers, foster carers and residential workers.

Under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 (CLCA) local authorities have a statutory obligation to provide financial and personal support up to the age of 24 for young people formerly in care who are in full-time education. The Children Act 2004 for the first time lays a duty on local authorities to promote the educational achievement of children they look after.

We recruited three successive cohorts of 50 care leavers planning to continue into higher education. The first group was followed throughout their three-year degree courses, the second group for two years and the third group for their first year. Participants were interviewed on several occasions and also took part in a number of group events organised by the research team and the Frank Buttle Trust. The final research sample consisted of 129 young people, by far the largest number of students formerly in care that has ever been studied.

Postal surveys of local authorities and higher education institutions (HEIs) were carried out near the beginning and end of the project and 11 local authorities acted as a reference group with representatives interviewed annually.

THE PARTICIPANTS

Geographical distribution, gender, ethnicity, family background, reasons for coming into care, age of entry and educational qualifications were compared with the care population generally. The participants were mainly nominated by local authority lead officers for the education of looked-after children, or by after-care workers, but were all volunteers. They came from every part of England, with the highest proportion of nominations received from London boroughs.

Women outnumbered men in all cohorts, though less so among those coming from overseas. Just under half of the participants were white British, but minority ethnic groups were over-represented in the study sample by comparison with the total care population.

The family backgrounds of UK-born participants and reasons for coming into care were similar to those of other children in care. Sixty per cent of the research sample had suffered abuse or neglect before coming into care, almost exactly the same proportion as in the care population generally. Sixteen per cent of the participants were unaccompanied asylum-seekers. In the third cohort 40 per cent had been born overseas. Compared with UK participants they were rather more likely to have birth parents who were better educated and in higher-level occupations.

CARE AND EDUCATION BEFORE UNIVERSITY

A full care and educational history was obtained from every participant. Some were critical of aspects of their care experience, especially in residential units, but on balance coming into care was regarded as beneficial. The majority of participants had spent over five years in care and at least one placement had been helpful to their education. Young people who had been placed in a foster family with a strong commitment to supporting education considered this a key factor in their educational success. The quality of the final placement seemed to be more important than the overall number of placements, which ranged from two to 33. Nearly a third of foster carers had studied at degree level and 31 per cent of foster mothers worked in managerial, professional or related occupations. Foster placements had generally offered a much better educational environment than residential care.

Many young people had missed periods of school before coming into care and this caused problems later. However, once in care, the majority attended school regularly and did well. Their GCSE performance was close to the national average, although 40 per cent moved to further education colleges rather than continuing at school in Years 12 and 13. Seventy per cent in Cohorts 1 and 2 and 91 per cent in Cohort 3 obtained five or more A*-C passes at GCSE compared with 6 per cent of all looked after children at the time.

By Degrees participants were highly motivated to do well at school, which differentiated them from many other young people in care. A positive attitude to education might come from their birth family, their foster carer, friends and siblings, or the school itself. Many of the students described themselves as self-motivated and had shown extreme determination to overcome difficulties and achieve their objectives.

The main problems identified by participants at the point of application to university were lack of information and advice when choosing universities and courses; changes of placement during preparation for examinations; uncertainty about available financial support; and anxiety about accommodation during term time and vacations.

THE EXPERIENCE OF UNIVERSITY

Students who did not have supportive foster carers often felt very much alone during their early weeks. Some had difficulty processing the information provided and missed the chance to apply for grants for which they were eligible. Making friends at an early stage was extremely important and was easier for those with places in halls of residence. A number of students missed this opportunity due to delays in local authority decisions about funding. In their second and third years most participants moved into shared houses or flats.

Some students, especially in London, stayed in council houses or flats that they were allocated on leaving care. This severely restricted their choice of course and university. If their accommodation was distant from the institution where they were studying it was difficult for them to make friends and meant they did not have easy access to campus facilities such as computers and libraries. Council flats were of variable quality, sometimes very unsatisfactory, and there were failures of communication between Housing and Social Services Departments. Most participants became more skilled at budgeting during their second and third years but still suffered from a constant shortage of money. Their main source of debt was the student loan and

bank overdrafts; credit card debts were much rarer. Almost all took out the maximum student loan every year and after three years their average level of debt was £11,235, compared with the national average of £9,210. They were usually obliged to take jobs in supermarkets or bars throughout every vacation, including the summer, and few could afford holidays.

Students who did not receive enough financial support from their local authority often took on too much paid work and this conflicted with academic demands and might result in failure to submit assignments or inadequate preparation for examinations. Lack of money also limited their social activities and prevented them from engaging fully in university life.

However the majority of participants, looking back over their university experience, said that they had thoroughly enjoyed it and learnt a great deal. They felt it had given them an opportunity to mature and acquire social and life skills gradually instead of being precipitated into adult life like most care leavers. They were vividly aware of the advantages that their education had brought them compared with other young people in care.

STAYING THE COURSE

A few potential students never got started because they did not achieve the required exam grades and no one was available to advise them of the many options still open to them. The drop-out rate for *By Degrees* participants (10 per cent) was lower than the national average of 14 per cent and applied almost entirely to the first cohort.

The main sources of stress were shortage of money, fear of debt, psychological problems arising from care and pre-care experiences, academic difficulties, relationship problems, upsets in birth or foster family, isolation and lack of emotional support. Students were most in danger of dropping out when three or more of these factors coincided. Difficulties in contacting social services caused extreme frustration. Participants with problems did not get appropriate help from Student Support Services in their institution and many had no contact with personal tutors.

The majority showed themselves to be very resilient and persisted with their studies regardless of poverty, ill health and family problems. Fewer participants in Cohorts 2 and 3 left prematurely, possibly reflecting better support from local authorities following implementation of the CLCA.

COMING FROM OVERSEAS

Young people born in countries outside the UK made up an increasing proportion of the research sample, amounting to 41 per cent in the third cohort. Sixteen per cent were unaccompanied asylum-seekers compared with only 5 per cent in the care population. Some young people travelled with paid agents who quickly deserted them, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation.

Participants from overseas usually had clear educational goals and were highly motivated to aim for university. Most reported that their parents had impressed on them the overriding importance of educational success for their future life chances. Despite having suffered extreme trauma and adversity none dropped out, except one in his second year of university who was refused permission to stay. They tended to be more focused on their studies and in many cases worked much harder than UK-born students with a care background, putting in on average twice as many hours of private study. Seventy-two per cent of asylum-seeking students were awaiting status decisions, feared repatriation and often lacked support from their local authorities.

THE LOCAL AUTHORITY AS CORPORATE PARENT

An important aim of the project was to assess how far the CLCA had improved the level of support offered by local authorities to

care leavers going to university. Comparison of responses from the two surveys carried out three years apart, together with the longitudinal study of 12 local authorities, showed that progress had been made at the policy level but that there were still wide variations in practice between different authorities.

More local authorities now have established procedures and written protocols that can be accessed by young people in care. We found that they are more willing than in 2001 to provide educational equipment, especially computers, and the proportion extending foster placements or converting them to supported lodgings has gone up. This improvement is reflected in the much lower drop-out rate for Cohorts 2 and 3.

On the negative side, only a minority of local authorities offered continuing personal support from a named person or Personal Adviser into the second and third years. In most cases the level of financial support provided fell well short of the benchmark figures used by the Frank Buttle Trust in assessing grant eligibility (see Appendix 5 in the full report).

WIDENING PARTICIPATION

Despite the finding that participants were attending 68 universities and colleges, including all the most prestigious ones, there is still a view among university administrators and admissions tutors that young people in care are not capable of reaching a sufficient standard to benefit from higher education.

Judging from our second survey, Government initiatives such as Aimhigher, designed to increase the numbers of disadvantaged young people going to university, do not appear to have raised awareness of the needs of care leavers to any appreciable extent. Most higher education institutions now have officers in post with a widening participation remit. However, very few of those who responded to our surveys had any provision in place for applicants or students with a care background and there seemed to have been little change over three years. Various kinds of outreach programmes had developed between the first and second *By Degrees* surveys, but only one university is known to have a comprehensive policy relating to care leavers. Ninety-five per cent do not offer any special pastoral support to students known to have been in care.

Seventy-seven per cent of the research participants, with some reservations, said they would have been willing to tick a box on the UCAS (universities entrance) form if one had been available.

CONCLUSIONS

The *By Degrees* research has provided important new information on a group of young people never previously studied. The findings have implications not only for the small number who at present go on to higher education but for the education and well-being of all children in care. It provides clear evidence that their ability and potential are being systematically underestimated and that they are deprived of most educational opportunities open to children growing up in their own families.

The research participants felt that they had obtained many benefits from their involvement in the project and were very appreciative of way the study had been conducted by the research team. They were keen that the information and experiences that they had shared with the researchers should be used to encourage more young people in care to aim for university. They thought the Government should insist on full implementation of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 so that all young people who had been in care, wherever they come from, would receive adequate support from their local authority. The 43 recommendations in the full report are informed by the views expressed by all the young people who took part in the project.

MAIN RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Guidance to the CLCA should make it clear that financial support for higher education students from local authorities should not be provided at a minimum level but be flexible and adapted to individual needs.
2. The Government should consider ring-fencing funds so that support for care leavers in higher education does not have to compete with ordinary placement costs for under-18s.
3. Schools should be aware of the educational and support needs of children in care but also of the danger of underestimating their ability and potential.
4. Secondary schools should be carefully chosen to give children in care the best chance of achieving high academic standards.
5. Schools should recruit university students or graduates to act as mentors to disadvantaged pupils, and particularly those in care.
6. University (UCAS) and college application forms should include an optional tick-box to indicate that an applicant has been in local authority care.
7. Foster carers should be trained and funded to value and promote educational achievement and to provide accommodation and support for young people during the examination years.
8. Young people should have the option of remaining in their foster homes (or returning to them during vacations) throughout their higher education courses.
9. Local authorities should make greater use of boarding schools, combined with weekend and holiday foster placements, especially for academically able young people.
10. All residential units should provide excellent conditions for study, a regular quiet period for homework and access to personal computers throughout the day and evening. There should be specialist units for later entrants to care preparing for examinations.
11. Children's homes should have a visiting education adviser and arrangements for outside help with homework.
12. Prospective students should be given a written contract specifying the financial and other support to be provided by their local authority, based on discussion of their individual needs and circumstances.
13. Students should be advised and funded to live in university accommodation for the first year.
14. Every student should have a named Personal Advisor for the full duration of his or her course.
15. All higher education institutions should have a comprehensive policy for recruitment, retention and support of students from a care background.
16. More HEIs should develop compact arrangements with local authorities to increase participation of care leavers, who should be specifically invited to open days and summer schools.
17. All institutions should have a named liaison person who can be contacted by leaving care teams and Personal Advisors.
18. Student Welfare/Support Services should contact new students known to have been in care and be proactive in offering any necessary help with financial, study or personal problems. They should be alerted to danger signals such as falling behind with assignments.
19. Admissions tutors and widening participation officers should be better informed about the care system and understand that examination grades may reflect difficulties overcome rather than the applicant's level of ability.
20. The Government should fund local authorities to support the education of unaccompanied minors seeking asylum. Local authorities should provide skilled support and advice on status problems and ensure high quality legal representation in case of need.

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