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Overcoming by degrees: exploring care leavers'
experiences of higher education in England

by

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Abstract

Existing research has shown that care leavers are one of the most disadvantaged groups in society and are at particular risk of experiencing negative long-term outcomes including unemployment, homelessness and mental health problems. This thesis makes a contribution to knowledge in this area by focusing upon a group of care leavers about whom very little is currently known: care leavers in higher education. These are young people who despite the odds, have succeeded educationally and are overcoming their early disadvantage to make a successful transition from care into adulthood.

This thesis uses Bourdieu's theory on transformation and reproduction in society and the concepts of *capital*, *field* and *habitus* to explore care leavers' experiences of higher education. It considers how the support available to care leavers from their local authorities and higher education institutions has developed since Jackson and colleagues (2005) *Going to University from Care* study first highlighted deficits in the level of support provided to care leavers. This thesis also compares the experiences of care leavers with students from other disadvantaged backgrounds to understand where care leavers have specific support needs as a result of not being supported at university by their birth parents.

Finally, this thesis considers the impact of the Buttle UK Quality Mark, developed in response to the findings of Jackson and colleagues (2005) and awarded to universities demonstrating a commitment to supporting care leavers.

Keywords: Care leavers, looked after children, transitions into adulthood, higher education, support, capital, field, habitus.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

It is recognised that young people leaving the care system are at greater risk of experiencing negative outcomes than their peers (Daining and DePanfilis 2007; Dixon and colleagues 2006; Heath and colleagues 1994). Care leavers moving into adulthood may often be continuing to come to terms with issues connected to their care and pre care experiences (Mendes and Moslehuddin 2004). Stein (2006a) describes care leavers experiencing an 'accelerated and compressed' transition into adulthood, denying them the normative process of gaining independence gradually such as having the option of returning home if things do not go to plan. An accelerated and compressed transition means care leavers are required to rapidly assume the various responsibilities that comprise adult life: running a home; paying bills; holding down employment; possibly bringing up children (Dixon and colleagues 2006; Ward 2008). Care leavers are also likely to possess fewer educational qualifications than their peers, limiting their employment prospects (Martin and Jackson 2002). This combination of factors, particularly in the current climate of high youth unemployment, means that care leavers who experience positive outcomes and lead successful lives creating a secure family home, gaining qualifications and finding employment, do so against the odds (Dixon and colleagues 2006; Wade and Munro 2008).

This thesis is concerned with the experiences of one such group of care leavers who have succeeded despite the odds and about whom very little is currently known: care leavers in higher education. Using Bourdieu's theory about the reproduction and transformation of class structures within society and the roles of *field*, *habitus* and *capital* in determining an individual's movement within that structure, this thesis explores care leavers' experiences of higher education across England. The aim is to increase understanding of how care leavers are currently being supported to acquire and build up the

economic, cultural and social capital needed to secure continued positive outcomes, and to explore how care leavers want to be supported during this transitional period in their lives. In order to do this, this thesis explores the experiences and views of the principle providers of support: student support staff in higher education institutions (HEIs) and staff from local authority leaving care teams. The experiences of students from other non traditional backgrounds who are widely targeted for support are also considered, to help identify whether care leavers' support needs differ from those of other students and if so, in what way. In the course of considering care leavers' experiences of higher education, this thesis also explores the influence of the Buttle UK Quality Mark awarded to HEIs demonstrating an ongoing commitment to supporting students from care backgrounds.

This thesis focuses on many of the challenges and difficulties currently faced by care leavers in higher education to better understand the support process in action. Despite this, it is hoped the reader will view this thesis as positive recognition of how much the care leavers interviewed have achieved. The majority of the care leavers in this study succeeded in entering higher education before the introduction of much of the support discussed in this thesis. Their achievements should therefore be acknowledged and applauded.

The remainder of this chapter discusses the literature relevant to care leavers in higher education, including the research literature, policy and legislation. It also describes the theoretical framework used to explore the issues. Chapter 2 sets out the aims of the current study and methodology. Chapters 3 to 6 present the findings and finally, Chapter 7 discusses those findings and the conclusions to be drawn from them.

1 Widening participation in higher education: the backdrop to care leavers' experiences

In order to understand the issues faced by care leavers in higher education, it is useful to first consider the expansion of widening participation as it is within this context that support for care leavers exists.

Widening participation is a term which has become extensively used in recent years in relation to education, often in conjunction with expressions such as 'social inclusion' and 'equal opportunity'. In order to fully understand it as a concept, it is important to look at the literature to see how it has developed. It is also important to discover what the literature tells us about the way that widening participation works in higher education so that it is possible to see how care leavers fit within this.

The development of widening participation

The initial move to widen participation in higher education occurred under the Thatcher government, primarily to address the needs of the economy rather than to improve outcomes for the more disadvantaged in society (Lewis 2002).

In the early 1980s, all policy including that on public sector spending was heavily influenced by the market, meaning that alleviating social disadvantage was not always the number one priority when new social policy was being considered (Greenbank 2006). An expected decline in the number of 18 year olds within the population had reduced pressure on government to increase higher education places. The belief that quality could be jeopardised if mature and non standard entry students were encouraged to enter higher education also meant that widening participation was not a feature of government policy at that time (Schuller 1991). However, a number of mainly economic developments led to a change in the government's attitude towards access to higher education, and in the eyes of those who had traditionally considered it

the preserve of the middle classes. The decline of the manufacturing industries meant less demand for unqualified labour and a need for a workforce with different skill sets. High unemployment and changes to the benefits system making it more difficult for 16 and 17 year olds to claim welfare support also meant that many young people opted to remain in education beyond the compulsory school age as an alternative to unemployment (Cregan 2003; Steedman and Green 1996).

In 1987, the White Paper 'Higher Education: Meeting the Challenge' proposed increased participation in higher education, opening it up to everyone with necessary the academic ability (Blake 1994). The White Paper also endorsed alternative routes and qualifications such as the Access Course and BTEC and was seen as an acknowledgment that increased participation would not have a deleterious effect on standards (Schuller 1991).

In 1992, polytechnics became universities under the Further and Higher Education Act, marking a further significant step towards mass higher education (Daniel 1993). However, this had the effect of stratifying higher education into pre and post 1992 institutions, a hierarchy which can still be seen today (Gorard and colleagues 2006; Smith 2007). This has potential implications for the experience of care leavers, if there is any link between an institution's position within such strata and its approach to widening participation.

The increase in participation that followed in the 1990's led commentators to look more closely at the manner in which this was occurring, to establish whether the increase was amongst young people from more privileged backgrounds, or whether there had been an expansion in the type of student entering higher education (Further Education Funding Council Widening Participation Committee and Kennedy 1997; Schuller 1991). Where participation was being widened, the initial focus was on disabled people and those from ethnic minorities, with the main concern being admissions rather than ongoing support throughout the student lifecycle (Lewis 2002). The

distinction between increasing and widening participation is still the subject of considerable discussion today (Callender 2011; Simister 2011).

Widening participation under New Labour

Upon the Labour government coming into power in 1997, David Blunkett established education policy as a priority stating that the government was;

Committed to the establishment of a learning society in which all people have opportunities to succeed. Increasing access to learning and providing opportunities for success and progression are fundamental to the Governments' strategy (Department for Education and Employment 1998, p7).

To do this, the government planned to focus resources initially on compulsory level education.

There was also a clear shift in emphasis by the Labour government towards inclusion and social benefits as the basis of widening participation, unlike their predecessors who had focused on increasing participation for economic purposes.

While the Labour government has continued the previous Conservative administration's emphasis on the rationale for increasing participation in HE (see Ward and Steel, 1999; Thomas, 2001), it also explicitly refers to social justice and *widening*, rather than just increasing, participation (Greenbank 2006, p143).

The government saw improving educational achievement as a means of increasing opportunity.

Our vision is to narrow social class gaps in educational achievement, to create a society with equality of economic and social opportunity (Department for Education and Skills 2006a, p4).

These were, therefore, policies which care leavers stood to benefit from even though they were not targeted at them specifically.

However, the literature on economic equality suggests that although New Labour may have been seen as promoting equality of opportunity, it was less successful in promoting economic equality, with the inequality gap growing during their time in government (Orton and Rowlingson 2007; Smith 2010).

In relation to higher education, the approach taken by the Labour government recognised that HEIs were not one homogenous group. Rather than impose rigid widening participation measures across the board, institutions were allowed certain autonomy to develop their own approaches, reflecting their particular structure and circumstances. This approach was illustrated by the widening participation strategies introduced by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), which were intended to make institutions think more coherently about widening participation (Lewis 2002). These strategies were submitted by each institution to HEFCE and used to inform their funding decisions (Higher Education Funding Council for England 1998). This approach suggested that it was HEFCE's role to look at widening participation in the long-term, rather than focusing on medium or short-term measures (Watson 2006). If this was the case, it implies that widening participation was intended to become an established, long-term element of higher education provision.

The introduction of tuition fees and widening participation: a paradox

Another important aspect of the Labour government's education reform, which continues to affect students including care leavers today, is tuition fees. In 1997, the Dearing Report was published on the future of higher education and contained a recommendation that the funding system be overhauled, which led to the eventual introduction of tuition fees (The National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 1997). The same government subsequently made further changes to that system, giving HEIs the discretion to charge top

up fees over and above the basic tuition fee for a course (Higher Education Act 2004). Some commentators argued that this conflicted with the government's strategy to widen participation.

The expansion of higher education that the White Paper 'The Future of Higher Education' (DfES 2003a) recommends is seen to be through widening participation. It is, therefore, difficult to understand the paradox of the White Paper in proposing to widen participation whilst also introducing variable top-up fees (Bowers-Brown 2006, p61).

To safeguard the interests of students, those institutions electing to charge top up tuition fees were required to submit an Access Agreement to the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) for approval, setting out the measures they would take to widen participation. Ultimately, if OFFA considered that an institution was failing to address its widening participation obligations, it could direct HEFCE to reduce the institution's funding or withhold its own approval for the institution to charge above the standard tuition fee (Department for Education and Skills 2003b).

Tuition fees under the coalition government: the future

Since the election of the coalition government in 2010, who should bear the cost of higher education has been the subject of much debate. The Browne Report (Browne 2010) which had been commissioned by the previous government recommended removing the cap on the level of tuition fees. The coalition government subsequently voted in favour of changing the maximum level of fees for higher education, enabling universities to charge up to £9,000 per annum for higher education courses (Department for Business Innovation and Skills 2010a). The government has issued new guidance to the Director of the Office for Fair Access placing an increased expectation on HEIs to promote participation and emphasising the government's objective to, "make greater progress in extending fair access for applicants of the highest ability to the most selective higher education institutions" (BIS 2011a; BIS 2011b). A National Scholarship Scheme has also been announced, providing students

from disadvantaged backgrounds with a package of support worth at least £3,000 (BIS 2011c).

It is unclear as yet how the increase in tuition fees and the government's new scholarship initiative will impact participation by students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The risk is that despite these new measures, students from poorer backgrounds, including care leavers, will be deterred from applying to university because of the prospect of incurring large levels of debt.

As this study was undertaken before the coalition government came to power, the issue of increased fees was not addressed.

Motives for widening participation

As already seen from the literature, historically, widening participation began as a response to changing economic conditions. With the decline of traditional industries such as manufacturing, there was growing recognition that new industry and skills were needed if the country was to remain competitive. The Labour government under Tony Blair instead emphasised the concept of social equality, of a learning society and the consequent benefits of this on other aspects of our lives. This had the effect of bringing widening participation into mainstream policy.

It has been argued that widening participation can be justified for both economic and social reasons and that both need to exist for a successful society (Further Education Funding Council Widening Participation Committee and Kennedy 1997). Supporting this view, the Council for Industry and Higher Education stated that, "The current low participation levels from certain segments of society are a waste of economic potential at the national, local and personal level, and act against social cohesion and social justice" (Council for Industry and Higher Education 1997, p9).

However, despite being intertwined, Smith (2007) argues the reality is that the economic motives are dominant and will most affect a government's approach

to widening participation. As a result of the constant shifting of the economy, Smith (2007) considers that the achievements in widening participation should therefore be seen as somewhat precarious. This is particularly relevant as the country goes through difficult economic times and the basis of funding for higher education is changing.

The economic benefits of widening participation can also be seen as a motive for HEIs. Whatever the motivations of individual staff for wanting to widen participation, colleges and universities have to operate as businesses in a competitive market to be successful. HEIs need to attract students to fill courses and secure income from their fees. In this respect, they have to play to their strengths. Older HEIs that are able to rely upon reputation and focus on 'traditional' subjects may have the luxury of being oversubscribed, although they will be under pressure to maintain that image. Other higher education institutions experiencing undersubscription will need to look upon students very much in terms of income versus output. Smith (2007) suggests that in this situation, students requiring extra output in terms of support measures, such as some care leavers, could be seen as representing a greater burden than those who make no extra demands beyond being taught. If HEIs do look at students in these terms, there are implications for widening participation policy. For example, HEIs might try to fulfil any widening participation obligations by targeting disadvantaged students with the fewest support needs to minimise costs. This would effectively be those students possessing the greatest levels of emotional, practical and financial support. This would be detrimental to care leavers whose support needs tend to be higher than those of other students (Jackson and colleagues 2005).

The meaning of widening participation in higher education

Gorard and colleagues (2006, p121) make an important point about what we are trying to achieve by widening participation in higher education when they ask,

In widening participation to currently under-represented groups are we seeking to offer a pre-existing experience of HE more widely, or are we expecting to change the nature of HE itself to accommodate the new kinds of students?

In reality, it is difficult to conceive of a situation where one of these options could be achieved to the exclusion of the other because of the conflicting pressures and factors experienced by institutions and students. The current research provides an opportunity to explore the extent to which different HEIs are making changes to accommodate care leavers' needs and how far HEIs expect students to adapt.

Jones and Thomas (2005) assess the implications of the Higher Education White Paper 2003. They contend that the meaning of widening participation is still unclear, but identify three approaches taken by HEIs: academic; utilitarian; and transformative. The academic strand sees low participation by certain target groups as being a result of low aspiration. This is not viewed as being the fault of the HEIs and therefore removes any onus from them to make changes to their own structure and approach. Instead, institutions focus on attracting those from a widening participation target group who are sufficiently qualified, for instance, through 'gifted and talented' outreach programmes. The utilitarian approach sees low aspiration and potential entrants lacking qualifications as reasons for low participation. It focuses on the relationship between economy and higher education and a need for education to respond to the developments in the economy. Curriculum reform, bursaries and pre-entry activities designed to address social or cultural barriers are the types of activity used with this approach. The authors identify many new universities and lower ranked pre-1992 universities as using this approach. Finally, the transformative approach requires HEIs to change radically to accommodate under-represented target groups, so that individuals do not have to change to benefit from higher education. Unsurprisingly, the authors state that this approach is not being taken by many institutions. The approach of the then Labour government was viewed by the authors as a combination of the academic and utilitarian.

Such models offer a useful framework to use as a starting point when considering the varied approaches of different HEIs and how those approaches change over time. Murphy and Fleming (2003) see a change in emphasis from students having to fit in with the style of HEIs to institutions having to adapt to accommodate the needs of their students. But does this reflect the situation at all HEIs or just those that need to attract students?

One would expect those students with the most emotional, practical and financial support to be better equipped to cope at HEIs which have not gone to great lengths to adapt to the needs of their students. This potentially works to the advantage of students from supportive family homes, as opposed to those coming from care with little in the way of support or resources. The fact that some HEIs will adapt themselves more than others to the needs of their non traditional students risks undermining the idea that widening participation means equal opportunity. HEIs taking Jones and Thomas' 'academic' approach will be less likely than other institutions to target potential students with multiple or complex needs and limited support such as care leavers. The guidance sent to the Office for Fair Access by the coalition government requiring it to focus on the efforts of the most selective HEIs to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds, is recognition that HEIs have had different attitudes to widening participation depending upon their type (BIS 2011b).

Factors restricting true widening of participation

The increasing number of students in higher education across England means that the make up of the student population is very different from thirty years ago. Walsh and Colleagues (2009, p406) describe this increase as yielding,

A learning community whose composition no longer reflects that of a 'traditional' undergraduate student body: 30% of students in full-time learning are older than 24 years of age ('mature'); many are engaged in employment whilst in education and an increasing proportion live at

home whilst studying (Higher Education Funding Council for England 2007).

Although overall numbers in higher education may be increasing, in addition to the number of non traditional students, research suggests that more needs to be done than simply throwing the doors of higher education open more widely. A number of deep rooted factors have been found to impact on individuals' choices about higher education, potentially to the detriment of those from less advantaged backgrounds.

According to the research literature, 'fitting in' in terms of social class or ethnicity is an important factor influencing decisions on which institution young people apply to (Forsyth and Furlong 2000). It has been found that some students choose post 1992 universities as they perceive them as friendlier and more mixed (Gorard and colleagues 2006; Leathwood and O'Connell 2003; Read and colleagues 2003). Individuals' attitudes to debt also affect whether or not they choose to enter higher education. It has been found that poorer students tend to be less debt tolerant than their more privileged peers and are more likely to be concerned or even deterred by the cost of higher education (Callendar 2003, Cooke and Colleagues 2004). As a result, there is a risk that a disproportionate number of young people from disadvantaged or non traditional backgrounds will choose to apply to the newer, less prestigious HEIs, rather than the more traditional institutions (Jones, Thomas 2005). This is particularly so if newer, less prestigious HEIs are likely to be charging less than the full £9,000 per annum tuition fees. As these newer or less prestigious HEIs tend to focus on more technical and vocational subjects as opposed to more traditional subjects such as medicine or history, selecting a newer institution may restrict the range of subjects available to a young person.

A positive consequence of institutions having to compete for student numbers is that this should act as an incentive to focus on meeting the support needs of potential students. Yet this could equally result in a sliding scale of attention to support needs across institutions, as some HEIs will have far less need to market this aspect of themselves than others. This may have implications in

terms of the ease with which students can identify and access support once they are at university. Potentially, care leavers may struggle to learn about the available support at some institutions, whilst others are extremely pro-active in advertising their services.

The possibility of students from disadvantaged backgrounds applying to less prestigious HEIs because they are more proactive in marketing their student support and are perceived as more welcoming needs addressing further, particularly to see whether the same holds true for care leavers. If this is the case, it suggests that even though participation figures for disadvantaged students are shown to be increasing overall (BIS 2010b), these students are not truly being afforded the same opportunities as their more privileged peers.

2 The participation of care leavers in higher education

The rate of participation for care leavers in higher education illustrates the disparity between the outcomes for looked after children and the population generally. In 2003, the Social Exclusion Unit estimated that only 1% of care leavers were entering higher education (Social Exclusion Unit 2003). Bowers-Brown (2006) compared higher and further education participation rates for care leavers with those of young people generally and found that 67% of young people in the general population entered further education whilst 37% entered higher education. Amongst young people with care backgrounds, 17% entered further education and less than 1% entered higher education.

The most recent government estimate of care leaver participation in higher education is 6% (Department for Education 2011a). This figure is based on local authority data of the activities of care leavers aged 19 years and does not therefore take into account those who may have returned to higher education after that age or who have not maintained contact with their local authorities.

The increase in participation since the Social Exclusion Unit's 2003 estimate indicates that a change is occurring, but does not tell us the reasons for this. It

could be the result of a number of factors; that more HEIs are recognising care leavers as a group with specific support needs and identifying those individuals within their student cohorts; that carers and local authorities are doing more to promote the value of education; that a higher proportion of care leavers are succeeding despite the system because they want a better future. It may equally be because increased opportunities have opened up to all young people including care leavers following the introduction of policies such as Every Child Matters, or because there are a lack of alternative employment options (Department for Education 2004). The statistics on the number of care leavers in higher education in 2010 shows a one percent drop in participation from the previous year, although it is unclear as yet whether this represents a cause for concern (Department for Education 2010b).

Changing attitudes towards care and education

Despite low participation figures for care leavers in higher education, policy literature reflects a considerable change in attitudes towards the care and education of looked after children over what has been a relatively short period of time. It is not that long ago since the educational aspirations of looked after children were not given any consideration whatsoever and the priority for care leavers was to find any form of work that provided a sufficient income to enable independence (Jackson 2001). In the past, the prevailing attitude of society was that it was,

Positively wrong for the state or a charitable organization to act as an agent of social mobility, or indeed for the child to receive advantages which other children from a similar social background who remained at home did not have (Jackson 1998, p47).

This attitude dates back to the Poor Laws and the concept of less eligibility. Parker and colleagues (1991) describe this as,

The notion that children who are looked after by a local authority away from home should not be better off than those in similar circumstances who remain with their parents.

Even as late as the 1930s, the Poor Law remained in existence and children were housed in the workhouse or large institutions, with the emphasis on merely providing a means of earning a living as opposed to providing support to reach their full potential (Holman 1986).

Today's approach to care and education centres on closing the attainment and opportunity gap between looked after children and their peers to give them a means of overcoming disadvantage (Social Exclusion Unit 2003). Reflecting this, the previous government described education as providing, "the foundation for transforming the lives of children in care" (Department for Education and Skills 2007). There are, however, concerns about the future provision of children's social care due to budget cuts in the current economic climate (CIPFA 2011). This may lead to a step backwards in attempts to provide looked after children and care leavers with the same educational opportunities as young people looked after by their birth parents.

Addressing the education of looked after children through legislation

The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, which amended the leaving care provisions of the Children Act 1989, places a duty on local authorities to provide support to care leavers as they make the transition into adulthood. The Act places local authorities under a duty to provide support associated with the expense of education or training to care leavers aged up to 24 years. This support should continue until the end of a care leaver's agreed course of study. Eligibility for this support depends upon a care leaver falling within the definition of a 'former relevant' child as defined by the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000. In addition to the Act, Volume 3 of the Children Act 1989 Guidance and Regulations provides transitions guidance to those responsible for supporting care leavers into adulthood (Department for Education 2010a).

The Children Act 2004 provided a major boost for the education of looked after children by placing a duty upon local authorities to promote the educational achievement of those in their care. At the same time, the 'Every Child Matters: Change for Children' initiative for which the Children Act 2004 provided the legislative underpinning acknowledged that there was an "important relationship between educational achievement and well-being" (Department for Education and Skills 2004, p8).

The 'Care Matters: Time for Change' White Paper (Department for Education and Skills 2007) helped cement the idea of educational opportunity as a vital element in the lives of looked after children. In it, the government emphasised the importance of putting the needs of the child first and of involving young people in the decision making processes affecting them. As with previous legislation and policy, the White Paper predominantly focused on the education of children of compulsory school age, but also contained significant proposals benefiting those young people considering higher education. For example, the role of the designated teacher responsible for looked after children was placed on a statutory footing and a duty was placed on local authorities not to disrupt a child's education during Years 10 and 11 when they would be studying for GCSEs. It also contained proposals affecting those transitioning into adulthood. This included extending both the entitlement to a personal adviser to the age of 25 for care leavers remaining or returning to education, and introducing a national one off bursary payment of £2000 for young people entering HE, which subsequently came into law in 2008 (Children and Young Persons Act 2008). Crucially, the 'Care Matters: Time for Change' White Paper recognised that the timing of young people's transition from care clashes with a vital period in their education, when gaining qualifications should be their first priority. It also recognised that unlike care leavers, other young people receive extensive practical, emotional and financial care from their parents during this period and despite this, are still not expected to suddenly acquire total adult independence. The White Paper outlined the pilots of the Right2B Cared4 initiative, looking at the involvement of young people in decision making processes and the Staying Put initiative, enabling young people to remain with their foster families beyond the age of

eighteen, both of which were intended to address the lack of support available to care leavers.

Despite the emphasis on promoting the education of looked after children and supporting care leavers throughout the transition into adulthood, the White Paper only stated that the government remained committed to encouraging higher education institutions to offer support to care leavers and did not impose any form of duty upon them.

Since the election of coalition government, the Every Child Matters and Care Matters initiatives no longer form part of its agenda. However, the statutory guidance for local authorities on promoting the educational achievement of looked after children remains, as does the Children Act 1989 guidance on planning transition to adulthood for care leavers (DCSF 2010b; Department for Education 2010a).

The minimal focus on high achieving care leavers

Until recently, there has been little research on successful care leavers, partly because care leavers are a difficult group to trace and also because they have tended not to succeed educationally (Martin and Jackson 2002). Over the last few years, literature on the education of care leavers has increasingly touched upon the subject of entering higher education, but only to the extent of referring to low participation rates (Stein 2001; 2004). The only major research study focusing on the experiences of those care leavers who reach higher education in England is *Going to University from Care* by Jackson and colleagues (2005), which will be considered further below. More recently, the YiPPEE project exploring looked after children's pathways in post compulsory education in five European countries, considered the routes to higher education taken by a number of young people (Jackson and Cameron 2011). This study found that in England, the strong link between social class and identity meant that care leavers had a reduced ability to make choices about higher education compared with their more advantaged peers. The study also found that relationships with professionals did not compensate for the support

of birth parents, care leavers did not receive the same encouragement to aspire and succeed as their peers, or the same opportunity for detailed discussion about the courses and options available to them. Care leavers were also more likely to be ready for higher education slightly later than their peers due to the disruption caused by their pre care and care experiences.

In addition to the lack of research evidence in this area, it is only relatively recently that the government started collecting information from local authorities on the numbers of care leavers in higher education via the SSDA903 return (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2011). This means there is currently a paucity of information about levels of participation and individual experience. The only alternative is to look towards research on students in higher education from other disadvantaged or non-traditional backgrounds to interpret where their circumstances overlap with those of care leavers. This could include drawing parallels from studies of students from economically deprived backgrounds such as those by Forsyth and Furlong (2000) or Quinn and colleagues (2005). However, this approach involves making assumptions about the lives of care leavers and is therefore an inappropriate means of planning services or improving experiences and outcomes for care leavers.

What is known about care leavers in higher education?

As stated above, the *Going to University from Care* study (Jackson and colleagues 2003, 2005) is the only existing research study to focus on the experiences of care leavers in higher education across England. The study was commissioned by Buttle UK (formerly the Frank Buttle Trust), a charitable organisation providing grant aid to children and young people in need, which actively campaigns to improve the situation of care leavers. The research involved exploring the experiences of three successive cohorts of fifty care leavers who were considering entering higher education, using a combination of interviews and group events. Postal surveys were also sent out to local authorities and higher education institutions to elicit their perspectives. The study identified key concerns for care leavers across various aspects of their

lives. These included having suitable term and vacation time accommodation, dealing with finances including securing adequate funding, paying fees and budgeting. Where these practical needs were not met, the care leavers described experiences of being homeless during the holiday period, having insufficient money to join their peers in social activities and failing to budget adequately for food and bills. The study also identified the lack of emotional and practical support available to care leavers compared with that which other students expect from their parents, for instance when applying and moving to university. This was found to place additional pressure on care leavers and, for example, made them stand out from others moving into student accommodation. The consequence of failing to address such concerns is ultimately that it deters care leavers from applying for courses or becomes a reason for dropping out (Jackson and colleagues 2003).

Jackson and colleagues (2005) considered the relative position of care leavers within the spectrum of students from different backgrounds requiring support and discovered that care leavers experienced similar problems to other disadvantaged students. However, they found the problems of care leavers were often more severe and more complex in nature compared with those of their peers. This raises issues about the minimum level of support that care leavers could benefit from compared with other students. At the very least, it suggests that care leavers could benefit from extra assistance to alleviate the logistical pressure of having to access multiple forms of support such as finance and counselling from different sources.

3 Improving outcomes for care leavers

In addition to specific legislation and policy initiatives benefiting care leavers in higher education, other wider factors have a potentially positive impact on outcomes for care leavers. Promoting increased resilience, improving the process of transition from care and promoting educational attainment are all recognised as means of improving outcomes for care leavers (Mendes and Moslehuddin 2006; Stein 2008).

Resilience

A key concept on which much of our understanding of improved outcomes for care leavers is based is resilience. Stein (2005, p1) defines resilience as;

The quality that enables some young people to find fulfilment in their lives despite their disadvantaged backgrounds, the problems or adversity they may have undergone or the pressure they may experience.

Masten (2006) describes the evolution of the study of resilience in three distinct stages; identifying its key components, for example, different risks and protective factors; establishing how resilience works, including exploring what is involved in naturally occurring resilience; and considering interventions to promote it. As a concept, it helps explain why some young people from disadvantaged backgrounds succeed in improving their lives and long-term outcomes, whilst others remain some of the most disadvantaged in society. Care leavers entering higher education would be expected, therefore, to demonstrate high levels of resilience, having deviated from the probable life course trajectory of those with care backgrounds.

Protective factors believed to have a positive impact on a young person's level of resilience include: the level of stability in that young person's life; a redeeming and warm relationship or secure attachment to a parent or substitute; achieving academic success, being able to develop skills or talents; personal characteristics such as motivation and feelings of self-worth; developing a positive identity; and being part of a network of pro social adults and peers (Masten 2006; Stein 2005; 2006b). These protective factors not only benefit young people as they move towards transitioning out of care, but will continue to have a benefit throughout that process and beyond. In his review of the research evidence on resilience and looked after children, Stein (2005) identifies educational achievement as a positive *outcome* of increased resilience. At the same time, he acknowledges that education *itself* can increase resilience in individuals, for instance, by opening doors to other opportunities and developing maturity.

Factors known to undermine resilience include the circumstances that lead to a young person entering the care system and negative experiences whilst in care such as frequent placement movement (Jackson and colleagues 2003; Allen 2003). Numerous placement changes potentially deprive young people of the opportunity to gradually develop relationships with adults and peers. Schooling may also suffer as a result of placement change, although research by Jackson and Martin (1998) suggests that provided there is continuity of schooling, some movement between placements may not necessarily affect educational outcomes. Lack of emotional support by birth and substitute families can also lead to an undermining of resilience (Biehal and Wade 1996). Biehal and Wade (1996) found that social workers often focussed on practical issues, more than the emotional issue of forming relationships and forming a positive identity of which family forms part.

In terms of resilience once young people leave care, Stein (2008) has identified three groups of care leavers from existing research: those “moving on”, those “surviving” and “victims”. The “moving on” group consists of young people who are making a successful transition from care. They will have experienced some stability, have formed secure attachments and been gradually prepared for independence. Their resilience will have been increased by their experiences and they are well positioned to assume independence. The “survivors” group consists of those care leavers who have experienced more instability and faced a greater number of problems than the “moving on” group. These young people consider themselves to be survivors and self-reliant, although they may in fact be accessing high levels of support. The “victims” group consists of care leavers who have had very damaging pre care lives and have also experienced multiple problems and disruptions whilst in care. They are likely to leave care early and have poor long-term outcomes, including unemployment and homelessness. One would expect the care leavers in the current study to fall into the “moving on” group, as they have acquired qualifications and shown resilience in reaching higher education.

Improving the process of transition from care

Research has shown that the transition from care to adulthood is more 'accelerated and compressed' for care leavers, than for other young people (Biehal and Wade 1996; Dixon and colleagues 2006; Stein 2006a). Whereas those in the general population make a gradual transition into adulthood usually extending into their early twenties, care leavers normally make the transition at around the age of 18 (Biehal and Wade 1996; Mendes and Moslehuddin 2006).

Although at one time, it may have been usual for young people in the general population to leave home at the age of 18 or even earlier, Stein (2004) describes how the change to gaining later and more gradual independence came about due to developments in society such as the reduction in youth employment and availability of housing. However, unlike most young people who have the flexibility to leave home as and when their personal circumstances allow, the timing of the transition process for care leavers is dictated by legislation, covering how long individuals remained eligible for care and support services. As a result, two parallel rates of transition have emerged for those who are, and are not in care. There is also a risk that this gap in the rate of transition will grow further in light of current economic conditions. Increases in the cost of living, scarcity of affordable housing and increasing unemployment rates make it likely that young people will be forced to remain in the family home for longer, while care leavers may be required to move on earlier.

The importance of making a gradual transition into adult life is considered by Stein (2008), who refers to Coleman's 'focal model of adolescence'. Testing of the model found that it is the luxury of time, that helps most young people cope with the challenges of adolescence and the transition into adulthood. In contrast, those young people who have to deal with a number of issues simultaneously are likely to face problems (Coleman and Hendry 1999).

It is as a result of research on aspects of the transition process that the value of specific leaving care services have come to be better understood and appreciated. Legislation such as the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000

demonstrates a recognition in child welfare policy of the significance of the transition process in promoting positive outcomes among care leavers. This has led to improvements in leaving care services although there is still concern about, “the pattern of uneven development in service provision across local authorities that continues to persist” (Wade and Munro 2008).

In relation to education, Stein (2008) identifies higher education, in particular, as providing an important opportunity for young people to move more gradually through the three stages of transition into adulthood, which he describes as, “leaving or disengagement; transition itself; and integration into a new or different social state” (p40). It is conceivable however, that without adequate support during their time in higher education, care leavers may miss this opportunity for gradual transition and merely delay the compressed and accelerated transition until graduation. This could occur where care leavers are not supported in learning how to live independently, or in finding employment following graduation.

Improving educational attainment

The research literature suggests there is a wide range of factors influencing the educational outcomes of care leavers, which is unsurprising when a large proportion of an individual’s childhood and adolescence is spent in pursuit of education. The high number of factors contributing to low educational attainment amongst care leavers is summed up by Watson (2006) in his discussion paper on widening participation in HE, where he refers to the fate of looked after children as being, “ the ‘perfect storm’ concatenation of indicators of educational disadvantage” (p4).

Much of the literature to date has focused upon the education of looked after children during their compulsory education and the factors increasing educational attainment at age 16, or possibly 18. However, much of what we have learned about the education of younger children is potentially relevant to young people once they reach university.

In a comprehensive review of widening participation research, Gorard and colleagues (2006) concluded that the main predictor of whether individuals remain in education is prior success in school. This provides one possible explanation of the low participation rates for care leavers in higher education. Low educational attainment, poor attendance, higher than average levels of school exclusion and suspension, frequent school changes following the breakdown of placements and low completion rates have all been identified as factors affecting the educational success of looked after children (Berridge 2007; Fernandez 2007; Harker and colleagues 2003). This makes the achievements of those entering higher education all the more striking.

Low educational attainment is not purely the product of a young person's time spent in the care of their local authority, but can also be attributed to negative experiences prior to care (Minty 1999). For example, children may have experienced abuse, neglect or trauma which could take considerable time to come to terms with and are likely to negatively impact upon their educational progress. Children who become looked after may also have come from families where education is not highly valued; they may have established a pattern of truancy and exclusion prior to entry to care. Aldgate and colleagues (1992) found that attainment levels were similar for looked after children and for those known to their local authority, but not in their care.

Having the emotional and practical support of others is important to young people making the transition to adulthood as it has been found to help them deal with problems and to promote the development of abilities such as perseverance and motivation (Allen 2003). In terms of educational outcomes, the availability of such support could dissuade care leavers from dropping out when faced with difficulties or choosing the more immediate financial temptation of employment over continuing education. However, this support may often not be available.

Parental expectation and educational experience are also considered significant factors in the educational outcomes of young people. Feinstein and colleagues (2004) found that parental income and education levels have a

significant impact on a young person's attainment levels. However, Gorard and colleagues (2006) conclude from existing research evidence, that it is almost impossible to establish how these factors exert their influence. They refer to the difficulty in considering whether talent is inherited or whether beliefs, values and aspirations are, "transmitted' to [people's] children by proximal interaction" (p27). In a study of care leavers who had successful educational outcomes, Jackson and Martin (1998) found no association between the educational achievements of parents and their children. However, they did find clear anecdotal evidence of a connection between parental interest in education and a child's motivation. This suggests that although looked after children and care leavers may not be influenced by the educational achievements of their parents, having a carer or other individual show a personal and continued interest in their education may strengthen that individual's motivation to succeed.

Because of adverse circumstances preventing looked after children from progressing normatively through their education, a proportion of care leavers return to education as adults. Existing research highlights the lifelong nature of education, particularly in relation to care leavers. A recent study exploring the views of 310 care leavers aged 17 – 78 years found that many of the respondents gained their qualifications later in life and not as teenagers or young adults (Duncalf 2010). This was viewed by the author as individuals fulfilling their potential "once they ha[d] moved well beyond the disruption and difficulties of their care experience" and suggests that there may be many 'mature' students within higher education who are care experienced, but may be overlooked for support aimed at those aged up to 24 years (p17).

However, those returning to education as adults, whether through evening classes, distance learning or the Access Course, may still find that a lack of support or resources impedes their progress. Since leaving the care system, some individuals may have built up networks of friends or have families of their own to provide support, advice and resources. They may equally be pursuing their education without support, disadvantaging them compared to other learners.

4 The Buttle UK Quality Mark

In response to the final research recommendations made by Jackson and colleagues (2005), the Buttle UK Quality Mark was developed to recognise universities and colleges of higher education demonstrating a commitment to care leavers. Based on the findings from *Going to University from Care*, institutions which apply for the Quality Mark must show commitment across four areas: outreach and pre-entry guidance; support through the application process; ongoing post-entry support throughout the student life-cycle and beyond; and monitoring and evaluation (Buttle UK 2012a). Buttle UK gives examples of how these elements can be put into practice including; developing links with local authorities to raise awareness of higher education; ensuring that care leavers' circumstances are taken into account so they are not precluded from receiving bursaries or funding due to missed application deadlines; providing 365 day accommodation; and collecting feedback on services from students. Institutions also need to demonstrate how their commitment to care leavers is embedded within their strategic policy framework. Since its introduction, Buttle UK have awarded the Quality Mark to over 60 universities across England and this number continues to expand (Buttle UK 2012b).

As a result of the *Going to University from Care* study (Jackson and colleagues 2005), the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) has incorporated a tick box within their application form allowing applicants to inform HEIs of their care leaver status. In addition to improving the provision of support, this should help to provide a clearer picture in future of the number of care leavers in higher education.

The Office for Fair Access, which has had responsibility for ensuring higher education institutions offer support to disadvantaged students, has encouraged universities and colleges to incorporate the needs of care leavers into their widening participation strategies. It has also encouraged HEIs to consider applying for the Quality Mark (OFFA 2012).

One of the fundamental aims of the current study is to explore the impact of the Quality Mark to see what influence it is having on the approach of HEIs to supporting care leavers within their student populations. The study by Jackson (2005) has provided some evidence of what support is required for care leavers in a higher education setting, but we do not yet know what is available, or what the impact of support has been.

5 Bourdieu's theoretical framework on the reproduction and transformation of class structures in society

This chapter began by considering the development of widening participation in higher education. It then focused on what is known about the participation of care leavers in higher education, and the development of the Buttle UK Quality Mark, introduced as a result of the findings of the *Going to University from Care* study (Jackson and colleagues 2005). The final section of this chapter sets out the theoretical framework chosen to explore the experiences of care leavers in higher education and the support available to them.

Bourdieu developed his theories on the structure and mechanisms within society over a period of four decades beginning in the 1960s. Wacquant describes his work as,

A persistent attempt to straddle some of the deep seated antinomies that rend social science asunder, including the seemingly irresolvable antagonism between subjectivist and objectivist modes of knowledge, the separation of the analysis of the symbolic from that of materiality, and the continued divorce of theory from research (Wacquant 1992, p7).

In addition to attempting to bring together a number of different theoretical concepts in the course of his work, Bourdieu also theorised across a wide range of themes including sport, art, class and education (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992).

Bourdieu focuses upon the impact social class and/or origin have upon the trajectory of an individual's life course. He is concerned with the factors which determine whether that individual remains within a social space occupied by others from similar backgrounds or moves into a new social space occupied by those from more advantaged backgrounds (Bourdieu 1984). Although our early life experiences, such as our tastes, patterns of consumption and the people surrounding us can be considered to tie us firmly into a particular social group, Bourdieu acknowledges that movement is possible.

To say that the members of a class initially possessing a certain economic and cultural capital are destined, with a given probability, to an educational and social trajectory leading to a given position means in fact that a fraction of the class (which cannot be determined a priori within the limits of this explanatory system) will deviate from the trajectory most common for the class as a whole and follow the (higher or lower) trajectory which was most probable for members of another class (Bourdieu 1984, p111).

The entrance into higher education of students from disadvantaged backgrounds and, more specifically, of care leavers represents this deviation from the probable trajectory. Bourdieu's theory on reproduction and transformation of class structures in society, therefore, provides an appropriate framework for considering the experiences of care leavers in higher education.

Bourdieu identifies three concepts: *field*, *habitus* and *capital* as key in determining the actions of individuals needed to transform their position in society. His use of the formula $[(habitus) (capital)] + field = practice$ illustrates how it is the combined operation of these factors which results in an individual taking a particular course of action within a specific setting (Bourdieu 1984).

The concept of 'field'

Fields may be physical environments such as the home or school. Equally, they may be “rules, rituals, conventions, categories, designations, appointments and titles which constitute an objective hierarchy, and which produce and authorise certain discourses and activities” (Webb and colleagues 2002, p21). Students exist simultaneously within a number of *fields*; living within a *field of higher education* whilst maintaining contact with a *home or community field*. Within each of these *fields* individuals will use the materials or resources available to them to try and maintain or improve their positions. Bourdieu's concept of *field* therefore involves the notion of inequality and dominance of individuals and groups over one another (Laberge 2010). Wacquant uses the analogy of a battlefield to describe the concept of *field*, “in which participants vie to establish monopoly over the species of capital effective in it” (Wacquant 1992, p17).

The *field* of higher education encompasses its own rules, expectations and traditions and will differ depending upon the specific HEI in question (Lareau 2001). Some universities will, for example, promote an exclusive atmosphere whilst others tend toward promoting wide access and inclusion. Despite the increase in widening participation in recent years, the *field* of higher education will still be unfamiliar to many individual students from less advantaged backgrounds. By comparison, the children of graduates or those coming from more privileged backgrounds are likely to have a degree of familiarity with the *field* of higher education, either because they have had access to someone with first hand experience and/ or because their privilege has provided them with access and experience of similarly exclusive environments. However, all students will go through a period of adjustment to this *field*, building a new identity and sense of belonging, whilst also, “negotiating between the old life they have left behind (family, home and friends) and the new life they have ahead of them” (Wilcox and Colleagues 2005, p712).

The concept of 'habitus'

Individuals' early life experiences create dispositions which influence how they act and the decisions they make in specific circumstances. These dispositions are known as *habitus* and impact on how one acts in any given situation. Bourdieu describes *habitus* as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions" (Bourdieu 1977, p72). *Habitus* enables "an intelligible and necessary relation to be established between practices and a situation" (Bourdieu 1984, p101).

Just as the absorption of early life experiences is unconscious, so too is the impact it has on an individual's actions. *Habitus* is embodied, "it is not composed solely of mental attitudes and perceptions" (Reay 2004, p432). However, despite the operation of *habitus* being an unconscious process influencing the decisions and actions of individuals in particular situations, it still provides an element of regularity and predictability to social life (Bourdieu and Waccquant 1992, p18). It is,

The universalizing mediation which causes an individual agent's practices, without either explicit reason or signifying intent, to be none the less "sensible" and "reasonable (Bourdieu 1977, p79).

As individuals within the same social groups or classes experience similarities in experience or upbringing, this can also result in the existence of a class or group *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977, p80). Common experiences among care leavers such as being separated from their birth families may therefore result in this form of group *habitus*, which explains similarities in care leavers' reactions to certain situations.

In relation to care leavers entering higher education, the early life experiences of students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds where progression into higher education is not automatically considered a possibility, means that going to university will become less of a natural step in their transition to adulthood than for someone from a background where higher education is the norm. Lack of encouragement to achieve and aspire educationally will

negatively impact on a young person's *habitus*, reducing their expectation of going to university. Where a young person does apply to university, the combination of their *habitus* and being in the unfamiliar *field of higher education* may result in their applying for courses or institutions where they feel comfortable, but which do not reflect the full extent of their academic ability. In comparison, the *habitus* of students from more advantaged backgrounds who throughout life have been supported and encouraged educationally, means they are more likely to possess higher levels of expectation and greater self belief in their own abilities, making them more likely to apply for the most selective or competitive institutions.

However, as *habitus* continually evolves throughout life as new experiences are processed, exposure to widening participation provision at university or supportive influences can still positively impact students' dispositions. This is significant as it means it is never too late for widening participation or student support to have a positive impact on the lives of students. Widening participation provides a continuing opportunity to positively influence the *habitus* of students from less advantaged backgrounds, including the students participating in this study who have either experienced care, come from low income families or are the first generation in higher education.

The concept of 'capital'

In addition to an individual's *habitus*, Bourdieu contends that the level and structure of *capital* that an individual possesses will influence their actions in any given *field*. He describes *economic*, *cultural* and *social capital* as, "the set of actually useable resources and powers" (Bourdieu 1984, p 114).

The structure of society means that those in the most dominant social groups are likely to possess more *capital* than those with less power. If one takes the stereotypical image of a politician or broker in the City, who attended the 'right' schools and holds a senior position in business or government, they will earn significantly more than an employee in a factory, and therefore possess greater *economic capital*. Their privileged upbringing will have given them

access to exclusive experiences such as having travelled widely or having attended an elite school, to which others in society aspire. Such experiences provide valuable *cultural capital* within certain *fields*. These brokers or politicians will also possess high levels of *social capital* as a consequence of having moved in certain social circles throughout their lives. Access to such high levels of *economic, cultural and social capital* enables individuals within dominant social groups to control the overall distribution of *capital*, so maintaining their dominant positions. *Capital* provides individuals with a means of exercising control over their lives and over the lives of others (Calhoun and colleagues 1993). The distribution of *capital* also helps prolong the dominance of the most privileged in higher education at the expense of students from less powerful social groups.

Different types of *capital* provide different forms of benefit in higher education. Having substantial *economic capital* allows an individual student to participate freely in many of the social and study activities available at university, but which can involve significant cost such as field trips abroad or purchasing sports equipment. Possessing *social capital* means a student has the ability to rely upon contacts and networks, either formed by the individual themselves, or those developed by family or friends. For example, a local authority staff member in this study described a situation where a student was able to remain at university despite experiencing problems on his course after local authority staff managed to resolve matters using their contacts within the university. *Cultural capital*, a “form of value associated with culturally authorised tastes, consumption patterns, attributes, skills and awards.” (Webb and colleagues 2002, *Glossary*) permeates the whole of student life and is subjective in nature. It can be embodied by students in their dress, demeanour, attitudes towards learning, degree of confidence and sense of entitlement (Reay and colleagues 2010). An undergraduate may, therefore, use or acquire *cultural capital* by participating in a popular sport or being selected to play for the university team, going to the most fashionable pubs and bars, or liking the ‘right’ type of music or fashion. Academically, *cultural capital* is gained by entering higher education and gaining a degree qualification. The marks a student is awarded, the modules they select, the

courses or field trips they participate in, can all contribute to an individual's *cultural capital* if those choices and achievements are valued or aspired to by others. The operation of *cultural capital* is closely linked to *field* as what is valued in the *field of higher education* may not be valued in other environments. Bourdieu highlights the role of the specific *field* in the way *capital* works,

....because capital is a social relation, i.e., an energy which only exists and only produces its effects in the field in which it is produced and reproduced, each of the properties attached to class is given its value and efficacy by the specific laws of each field (Bourdieu 1984 p113).

How the different forms of capital interrelate to produce this social advantage or disadvantage has been the cause of debate. Silva and Edwards (2004) state that whereas theorists such as Putnam and Coleman have argued that *social capital* has a greater impact on social position than others, Bourdieu's theories are based upon capitals working in a package and that, "we accumulate and invest in all forms of capital, yet the effects of accumulation and investment are not the same throughout" (p3). Swain (2003) views Bourdieu's use of social capital as "a residual category, brought into play when cultural capital and economic capital, [.....], seem inadequate..." (p188). It is, however, possible to hypothesise how all three forms of *capital* are relevant to understanding the experiences of care leavers in the *field of higher education*. The concept of different forms of *capital* operating as a package in a particular *field*, in conjunction with an individual's *habitus*, is the main reason why Bourdieu's theory was selected. The interplay between these three concepts reflects the many influences and circumstances which make up the lives of care leavers. The concepts of *field*, *habitus* and *capital* as factors determining whether individuals move beyond the social space traditionally occupied by individuals from the same social backgrounds therefore provides a suitable theoretical framework for exploring the transition of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds into university.

6 Conclusion

We know that for the majority of care leavers, outcomes are poor. Children are disadvantaged even before they enter care, due to the abuse, neglect or trauma that brings them to the attention of children's social care services. Poor care experience may then further compound that disadvantage. Historically, looked after children also suffered because of the concept of less eligibility; although the wider policy shift under New Labour towards reducing inequality in society has helped move on from this position, there are concerns that the current economic situation may see a return to it.

Despite this, care leavers are far more likely than their peers to experience those factors which potentially isolate them from the rest of society, for instance, unemployment, homelessness and the lack of any sort social network or support (Biehal and colleagues 1994; Department for Education and Skills 2006b; Jackson and Martin 1998; Mendes and Moslehuddin 2004; Stein 2006a; Ward 2008). However, research evidence also shows a diversity of outcomes (Wade and Munro 2008).

Although research and policy address the period of transition into adulthood, much of the literature focuses on those care leavers who are most vulnerable in terms of having the least positive outcomes. In the same way, research and policy on education has predominantly focused on achieving basic levels of attainment. We know far less about those care leavers who, against the odds, are in a position to consider higher education. It is important that these individuals are not overlooked because they have shown such great resilience and determination. Instead, these individuals need continuing support to succeed if the attainment gap between those with and without care experience is ever going to be bridged. As the Jackson study highlights, ongoing support is required by care leavers throughout their time in higher education to overcome the difficulties they face which are likely to be multiple and more complex than those experienced by their peers (Jackson and colleagues 2005).

The literature review highlights how little existing research there is on the experiences of care leavers in higher education beyond the study by Jackson and colleagues (2005). At a national and institutional level, data collection is beginning in this area and in particular, the tick box on the UCAS application form should eventually provide a clearer picture of participant numbers. However, qualitative data capturing the subjective experiences of all care leavers and higher education providers are also required to complement the quantitative data being collected.

Through its Quality Mark, Buttle UK has provided a potential means of incentivising HEIs to help make up for the deficit faced by care leavers. Legislation such as the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 has imposed duties on local authorities to support care leavers in higher education. What we do not yet know, is what impact these new forms of support are having and how care leavers themselves view them.

This study therefore begins to fill this gap by exploring the impact of the support available to care leavers to help compensate for their disadvantage. It also explores where care leavers currently fit within the context of higher education. Do they have the same opportunities as other students or despite the support measures being introduced, are they still at a disadvantage?

The time is also right for research on the experiences of care leavers in higher education. Whilst most institutions are at relatively early stages in their policy and service development in respect of care leavers, it is an appropriate time to assess the initial impact of different measures. This will provide those involved in this area with an indication of the range of measures being implemented, and which of those are particularly successful or unsuccessful from the perspective of care leavers.

Chapter 2

Methodology

1 Introduction

The previous chapter outlined Bourdieu's theory on the reproduction and transformation of class structures in society which, provides a theoretical framework against which to consider the experiences of care leavers in higher education and the support available to them. The chapter established care leavers as a group who are currently statistically very unlikely to benefit from higher education and who have a higher than usual likelihood of experiencing negative outcomes including homelessness and unemployment. It also highlighted the current lack of research on the experiences of care leavers in higher education. This chapter sets out the aims of this thesis and describes the methodology used in this study.

2 The literature review method

The literature discussed in Chapter 1 was reviewed using a systematic approach as it offered a thorough means of searching for texts. This was particularly important as leaving care and widening participation are two substantial subject areas.

The first stage of the review involved background reading to familiarise the researcher with the key issues, authors and relevant vocabulary. Following this initial reading, a list was compiled of potential areas for review, and this list was then narrowed down to three central topics covering the core issues that had emerged. These areas were; the political/social background; outcomes; widening participation in higher education. Following the recommendations of Hart (1998) and Gash (2000), a search profile was compiled for each of these areas. In order to establish the parameters of the

search, the profiles included a very short outline of the subject area. This was intended to help clarify the extent of each profile and help to fully consider the issues being explored. Each search profile outlined the parameters of the particular topic including; a one sentence description; how many years back the search should go; and key search terms.

The next stage involved identifying the major sources of information that would be used to search for relevant literature. These included the university catalogue, Metalib databases, government and policy websites, educational institution and organisation websites, i.e. HESA, HEFCE, Thomas Coram Institute. Bibliographies of seminal texts were also used to identify further references.

Where search terms resulted in a large number of references being returned, additional words and phrases were included as well as variations using the Boolean system to reduce them to a manageable number. This problem was encountered in particular when searching on widening participation in higher education. Alternative terminology was also used in the literature to describe the same article. For example, although 'care leavers' and 'looked after children' are terms frequently used to identify young people in and leaving care, searches also had to be made under alternatives including 'cared for children' and 'children in public care'. Although this initially made searching more time consuming, alternative terms were recorded and used in subsequent searches.

A record of searches was maintained, including the search terms used and the sources searched to avoid duplicating searches.

Texts were initially assessed for relevance by skimming the abstract, introduction, conclusion and paragraph headings. Using this method proved an effective way of identifying texts which were irrelevant, but which at first glance appeared to be connected to the research.

Where texts were available in full electronic format, they were downloaded and printed out so that excerpts could be highlighted for reference and the printed copy was kept with any notes made. For books and other texts in paper format, notes were made and photocopies were taken of any especially relevant passages.

Refworks was used to store references together with a note of where each text was located, for example, either as a PDF file on the computer or its location at a particular library.

3 The research aims

The aim of this thesis was to explore care leavers' experiences of higher education and the support received during this period of their lives. The study considered the range of support available, care leavers' views and experiences of accessing that support and most importantly, how care leavers would like support to be provided. To provide context to this exploration of care leavers' experiences, the study not only focused on the views of care leavers themselves, but considered the support process from the perspective of two key support providers: local authorities and student support staff in higher education. The study also explored the experiences of students who were the first in their families to enter higher education and those who came from low income families. Current widening participation initiatives are designed to provide equal opportunities in higher education for those from disadvantaged backgrounds and care leavers are able to benefit from these policies alongside other students. However, in order to alleviate the potentially complex and multiple needs of care leavers identified by Jackson and colleagues (2005), it was necessary to understand how care leavers' experiences differed or overlapped with those of other students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This will help to effectively target care leavers with additional support to compensate for deficits arising as a consequence of their pre care and care experiences, which are not being met by existing widening participation provision. Exploring the experiences of other disadvantaged students, therefore, provided a comparison group to better

understand how the experiences of care leavers and other disadvantaged students differed. The students in these comparison groups have already been identified by government as a section of the population who have traditionally not benefited from higher education (HEFCE 2007). Finally, the study explored the impact of the Buttle UK Quality Mark, available to higher education institutions (HEIs) demonstrating an ongoing commitment to supporting care leavers.

The aims of the study were divided into two stages as follows: establishing the range of current support provision; and exploring support provision in practice.

Establishing the current range support provision

Aims:

- a) To build a picture of the range of support provision available within higher education aimed at increasing participation or providing ongoing support throughout the student lifecycle to disadvantaged students such as those who are the first in their family to go to university or are from low income families.
- b) To identify the range of discrete support provision in HEIs targeted at care leavers.
- c) To identify the range of support provided by local authorities to care leavers entering higher education.
- d) To establish the range of support accessed by a sample of care leavers and non care leavers in HEIs across England.

Exploring support provision in practice

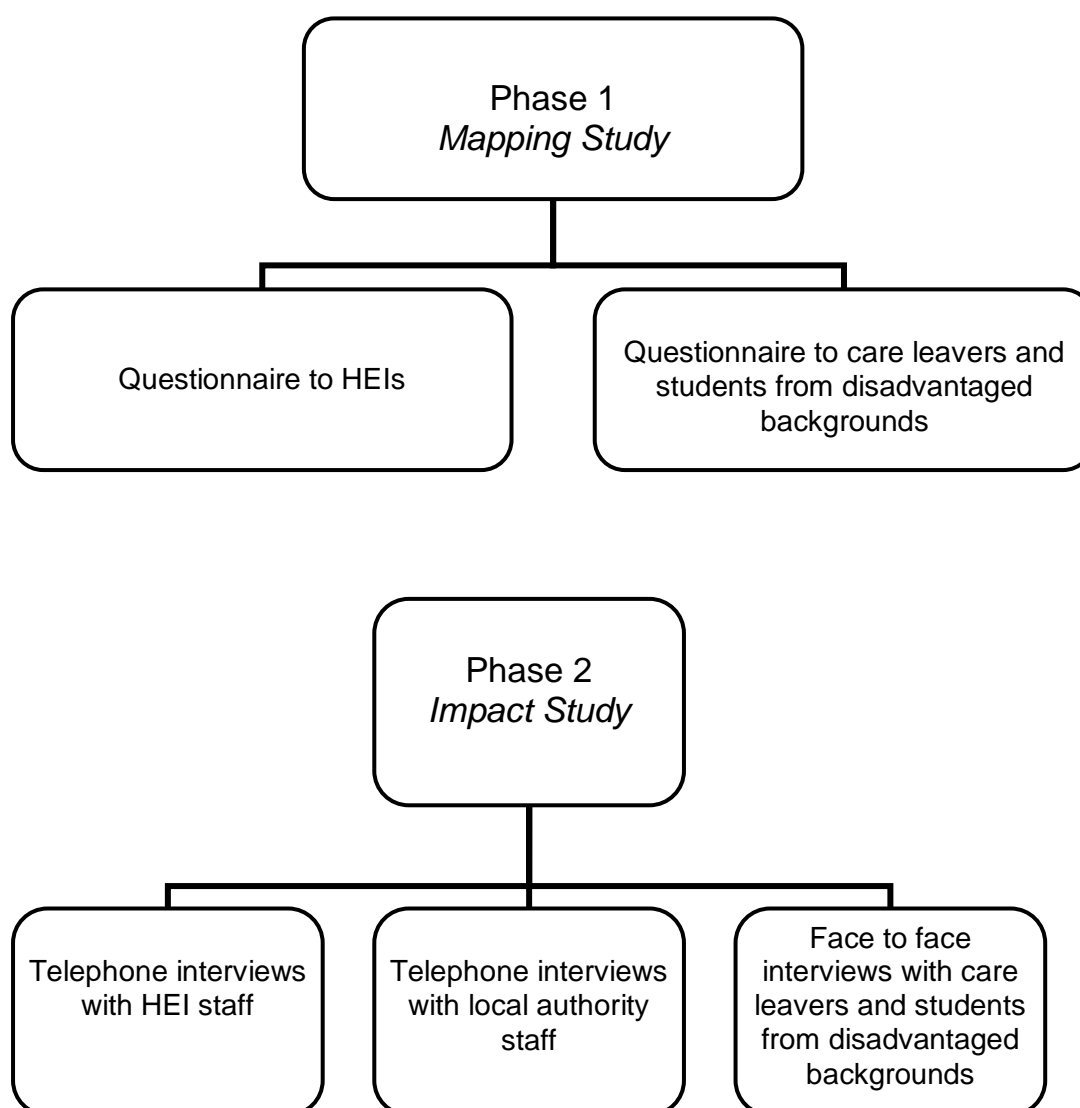
Aims:

- a) To explore the experiences of care leavers and students from disadvantaged backgrounds accessing support provision in higher education and to identify deficits in support.
- b) To understand how the experiences of care leavers in higher education compare with those of students from low income families and first generation students, for example, to establish how the issues they face differ or to what extent overlap.
- c) To explore the issues faced by local authority and higher education staff implementing support provision.
- d) To explore the impact of the Buttle UK Quality Mark on the provision of support to care leavers in higher education.

4 Research design

Data collection was divided into two phases. The first phase consisted of a *mapping study*, gathering data on the structure and range of support provision available to care leavers, students from low income families and first generation students across a number of HEIs. This phase also gathered data on the range of support being accessed by care leavers and students from other disadvantaged backgrounds. The second phase took the form of an *impact study* gathering in depth data from support providers and recipients about the process of delivering and accessing support in practice. The research design is illustrated in Figure 2.4.1 below.

Figure 2.4.1 The phases of data collection



The design of the study therefore reflected the separation of the aims into those relating to range of support provision and those exploring the provision of support in practice.

(I) The mapping study

The initial stage of the *mapping study* involved establishing the range of support provided by HEIs to disadvantaged students, including care leavers.

Questionnaire to higher education institutions

A short internet questionnaire using Survey Monkey was sent to 263 universities and colleges of further education offering higher education qualifications across England identified through the UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service) website. This divided into 108 universities and 155 colleges of further education. The recipients included every institution holding the Buttle UK Quality Mark at the time of circulation, which was awarded only to institutions with university status. Although universities with the Quality Mark were spread across many areas, at the time the questionnaire was circulated there were none in London, the South West or the Eastern Counties. It was expected that the vast majority of universities holding the Buttle UK Quality Mark would return the questionnaire giving approximately twenty responses. Of the remaining universities and colleges, a twenty percent response rate, would give approximately 48 further responses bringing the expected number of responses from HEIs to around 68. A copy of the internet questionnaire is shown in Appendix 1.

An attempt to maximise the number of responses was made by identifying specific recipients of the questionnaire at each HEI via their websites. The recipient was asked to forward the questionnaire for completion to a colleague as appropriate. This recognised that HEIs have differing structures of student services and widening participation.

As already discussed, the questionnaire was intended to provide an outline of the basic structure and range of provision at each HEI. From preparatory work involving discussions with widening participation staff at Loughborough University, it became apparent that services relevant to care leavers, students from low income families and first generation students were likely to be provided by several different arms of an institution, for instance, accommodation services, the academic departments and student welfare. A strength of the questionnaire was therefore that it enabled widening participation staff to clarify details of their provision before responding.

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section one requested basic information about an institution's overall approach to care leaver support and the range of support provided. Section two covered more detailed information about provision and addressed other issues such as experiences of inter-agency working and the respondents' views on the impact of the Buttle UK Quality Mark. This design was chosen to elicit at least basic data from as many institutions as possible.

The questionnaire covered the following issues:

- the range of student support provision offered to disadvantaged students and to care leavers
- how provision was accessed, e.g. through a 'one stop shop' or via individual departments
- how students were made aware of support
- whether their institution had considered the Buttle UK Quality Mark and why/why not?
- at universities holding the Quality Mark, what provision had been introduced as a result of that commitment
- the level of data collected by institutions about care leavers, their students from disadvantaged backgrounds and the take up of support services
- whether respondents were willing to participate in further stages of the study and if so, the identity of the most appropriate staff member for interview.

There were considered to be several advantages to exploring the range of provision across a larger number of HEIs before focusing on a smaller sample to explore provision in practice. This approach provided an overview of the forms and types of provision being implemented across both a wide geographical area and a number of types of institution including post 1992 and Russell Group universities. Initial focus on a broad sample of HEIs helped provide a clearer indication of the extent to which care leavers were recognised as a distinct group of students requiring support.

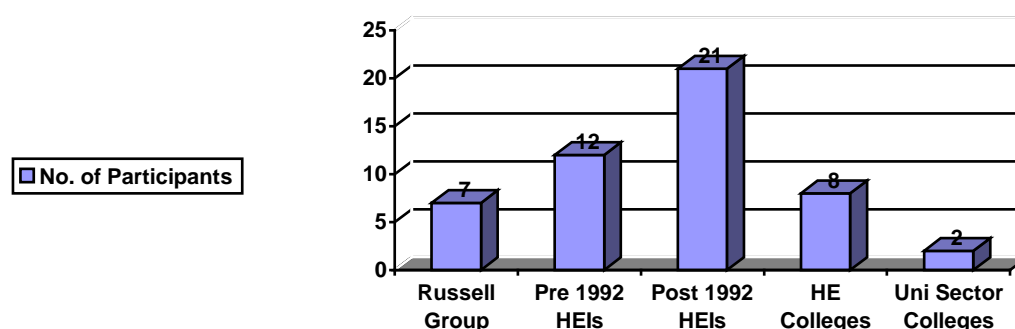
Collecting data from a large number of institutions at the outset assisted practically with the recruitment of student participants. Care leavers form a small percentage of the student population and will be unknown to their HEIs unless they choose to disclose their backgrounds. It was also anticipated that care leavers may have been reluctant to come forward as higher education afforded them potentially their first opportunity not to be labelled as being 'looked after'.

Response rate

The questionnaire was initially circulated to HEIs by email. It included an outline of the study and confirmed that respondents' identities and those of their institution would remain confidential. As a result of this contact, eighteen responses were received. Approximately one month after the initial email, the Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education (AMOSSHE) and the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) circulated the questionnaire to their contacts in HEIs, increasing the response rate to 50 HEIs. As only eight of the 50 responses were from colleges offering higher education qualifications as opposed to universities, a further email was circulated by the author to higher education colleges. However, this elicited no further responses. There are several possible reasons behind the low response rate from colleges; for example, the questionnaire may not have been as simple for college staff to complete due to the structure of their provision or other issues may have been a priority at that time for student support staff. A future study would require specific consideration of the best way to recruit colleges.

The 50 respondents represented a 19% response rate, which was lower than the anticipated figure of around 68. Figure 2.4.2 illustrates how these 50 respondents were divided by type of institution, for example, Russell Group university or HE college.

Figure 2.4.2 Questionnaire respondents by HEI type



N=50

Eighteen percent (9/50) of respondents only completed part one of the questionnaire and 82% (41/50) completed, or substantially completed both parts.

Respondents awarded the Buttle UK Quality Mark

Thirty-six percent (18/50) of respondents came from HEIs awarded the Buttle UK Quality Mark. A further ten percent (5/50) were in the process of applying and 18% (9/50) were considering making an application. Twenty-two percent (11/50) respondents stated that their institutions had no plans to apply and 14% (7/50) did not know their institution's position. This meant that overall, 64% (32/50) of the questionnaire sample came from institutions with a positive interest in the Quality Mark, compared to 36% (18/50) who had no interest or did not know.

As the impact of the Buttle UK Quality Mark was a central focus of the study, it is unsurprising that there was a higher response rate amongst student support staff at HEIs holding or in the process of applying for the award.

Consequently, the reader must bear in mind that the sample may not be representative of institutions nationally, although it still provides a range of valid perspectives on the support process. The data collected was also from individual members of student support staff, possibly reflecting their own views and experiences rather than the official version. This however, should

be viewed as a strength of the study as it is more likely to reflect what was occurring within institutions on a daily basis.

Questionnaire to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including care leavers

The second stage of the *mapping study* involved collecting data using an internet questionnaire sent to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including care leavers, about the range of support they had accessed. The questionnaire was designed to explore:

- the range of support services being accessed
- students' awareness of provision
- an overview of experiences of accessing provision
- awareness of the Buttle UK Quality Mark

As the focus of the internet questionnaire was to elicit information about awareness and use of support services in higher education, it was decided not to include questions about care leavers' placement histories such as type of placement and age of leaving care at this stage. Individuals' care backgrounds were instead discussed with those care leavers participating in face to face interviews, which provided an opportunity to obtain far richer data about their care experiences and views.

Student support staff at the 50 HEIs who responded to the staff questionnaire were asked to circulate the student internet questionnaire to their undergraduate student body, together with an outline of the research. The opening section of the questionnaire asked students to confirm whether they were a care leaver, from a low income family or the first generation in their family to go to university. If they answered 'yes' to any of these questions, they were asked to continue with the questionnaire. A definition of care leaver and low income family was included within the question. The approach had practical and sampling implications as it provided a means of reaching

individuals in these three groups directly. There was no need for HEI staff to identify students falling into the three target groups which could bias the sample. The approach also meant it was irrelevant whether an individual had disclosed their care background directly to their HEI. A copy of the questionnaire is shown in Appendix 2.

In order to maximise the questionnaire response rate, students were asked to confirm if they wished to be entered into a prize draw to win gift vouchers and winners were selected at random following closure of the questionnaire. Huang, Hubbard and Mulvey (2003) found that incentives can affect response rates provided they are meaningful and enticing to the respondent group.

Response rate

As with the circulation of questionnaires to student support staff, the initial response was boosted by the assistance of the Office for Fair Access who sent a follow up email to their HEI contacts attaching an internet link to the questionnaire webpage. In total, 6,817 questionnaires were returned. From these, 3% (200) described themselves as care leavers, 52% (3554) were from low income families and 73% (4985) were the first in their generation to go to enter higher education.

(II) The impact study

The second phase of data collection was an *impact study* exploring the provision of support in practice across a smaller sample of support providers and recipients. The aim was to look beyond the theoretical design and operation of support packages to understand individuals' own experiences, the challenges faced and how they overcame them. The questionnaires used in the *mapping study* contained a number of questions asking students and support staff in HEIs about their experiences and views of support. This provided a useful overview to inform the more in depth second phase of data collection.

The *impact study* used face to face interviews with students and telephone interviews with local authority and HEI staff to gather data.

Interviewing student support staff in HEIs

The plan was to interview a member of student support staff at 24 of the HEIs returning the questionnaire sent out as part of the *mapping study*. The aim was to build upon the questionnaire data, providing a more in depth understanding of the issues involved in supporting care leavers and other disadvantaged students. Areas covered by the interviews included:

- gaining a more detailed exploration of how widening participation provision was structured at institutions
- exploring the practical issues faced by staff responsible for supporting care leavers
- exploring how student support staff raised awareness of support for care leavers amongst the student population
- exploring whether and in what way the approach of HEIs to supporting care leavers differed from their approach to students from low income backgrounds and first generation students
- at universities holding the Buttle UK Quality Mark exploring:
 - how provision under the Quality Mark sat within institutions' widening participation strategies
 - how introducing the Quality Mark had affected existing provision
 - the perceived impact on care leavers and other disadvantaged students of holding the Quality Mark
- exploring the perceived value and impact of the Quality Mark amongst institutions that did not hold the award
- exploring how student support staff saw their institutions' support activities developing in future

Telephone interviews were selected as student support staff were being interviewed in their professional capacity. It was felt that the quality of data

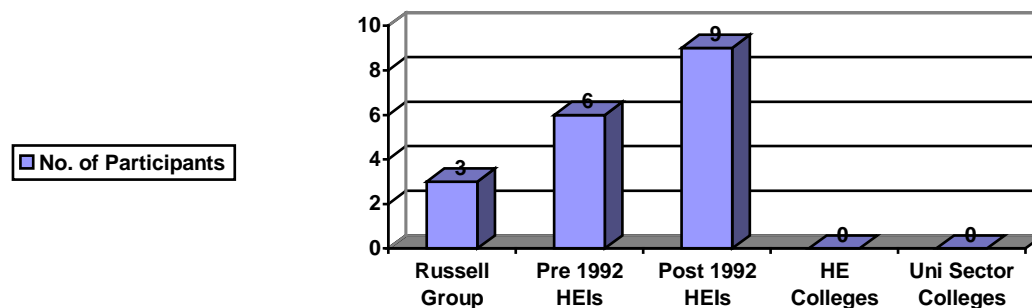
was unlikely to be compromised by being unable to see and react to body language or by having limited opportunity to build a rapport with interviewees. Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) compared telephone and face to face interviewing and found no significant difference in the nature and depth of responses resulting from interview method.

The intention was to interview student support staff across a range of institutions including eight universities holding the Quality Mark, and eight universities and eight colleges offering higher education qualifications without the Quality Mark. Participants were to be selected to form eight geographical clusters. Each cluster would consist of three institutions: a university holding the Quality Mark and a university and college without the Quality Mark. Spreading the sample geographically was intended to ensure there was no regional bias created by having a large number of participants from particular parts of England.

Student support staff at 29 HEIs confirmed in the questionnaire that they were willing to participate in a telephone interview. Eighteen interviews were eventually secured. Of those student support staff, twelve came from institutions holding the Buttle UK Quality Mark, three were from institutions in the process of applying, one from an institution that was considering applying and two from institutions with no plans to apply at that time. There was also a good geographical spread of HEIs. In relation to those student support staff who had initially indicated they would be willing to participate, but where interviews could not be secured, in some cases, staff had left post, others did not respond to emails and telephone calls seeking to arrange an interview or did not feel they could participate due to organisational issues at their institutions. No staff from colleges offering higher education qualifications agreed to be interviewed, although several attempts were made by telephone and email to those who had indicated in the questionnaire they would be willing to do so. A representative of the Mixed Economy Group also provided details of a number of student support staff at colleges who it was thought may be interested, although this also failed to secure any interviews. At this point, it was decided that the available avenues for recruiting participants from

colleges had been exhausted and that consequently, the remainder of the study would focus upon care leavers attending universities. Figure 2.4.3 shows the breakdown of interview participant by institution type.

Figure 2.4.3 Interview participants by HEI type



N=18

As student support staff were likely to have limited time available to engage in the research, semi-structured interviews were used to ensure specific topics were covered. However beyond this, interviewees were able to dictate the direction of conversation and introduce issues. This avoided imposing the author's own assumptions about the significance of different issues.

Exploring provision in greater depth across 18 institutions provided a context in which to better understand the experiences described by students. It also made it possible to explore how far the views and experiences of students were recognised by student support staff.

A copy of the question guide used for the interviews with HEI staff is shown in Appendix 3.

Interviewing local authority staff

As with the sample of HEIs, it was decided that recruitment of local authority staff should as far as possible reflect geographical spread. Initially, an interview with a staff member in eight local authorities was planned. However, once the interviews with higher education staff were agreed, it was decided it

would be more appropriate to try and secure interviews with local authorities in the same geographical areas as the universities. An email request was sent to the Director of Children's Services and the Leaving Care Team Manager at each authority using details listed on the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) website. The email outlined the study, confirmed that ethical approval had been received from Loughborough University and included a participant information sheet. Seventy-three local authorities were contacted in total and interviews were secured with twelve. These represented a good geographical spread, although an interview with an authority in the Greater London area was not secured despite contacting several authorities. The range of authorities interviewed included county, city, unitary and metropolitan borough councils. The authorities included those covering urban and more rural areas of the country.

Semi-structured telephone interviews were again used as staff were being interviewed in their professional capacity. Interviews were structured to ensure that a range of topics was covered, whilst allowing interviewees to introduce issues they considered relevant. The interviews explored:

- the range of support provided by the authority
- the support/ advice process entered into where authorities had a care leaver considering higher education
- experience of liaising with HEIs
- views on the most effective forms of support provision
- awareness of the Buttle UK Quality Mark and staff perceptions of its impact upon the experiences of care leavers

The consent of the Association of Directors of Children's Services was obtained to carry out the interviews.

Local authority staff were included in the research because of the role they play in providing practical, financial and emotional support to care leavers. There are other agencies and individuals in addition to social workers involved

in supporting care leavers, for example, foster carers, family members and teachers. However, with a study of this scale it was impractical to incorporate the perspectives of so many groups. Consequently, local authority staff were chosen because of the key role they play both practically and emotionally in supporting care leavers entering higher education. Staff are responsible for providing crucial support in the period leading up to university entry. Subject to a care leaver meeting eligibility criteria on age and period of time spent in care, the local authority may also have a statutory duty to continue providing such support until a student completes their degree. It was therefore important to understand the role played by local authority staff in order to understand care leavers' experiences of support in higher education.

A copy of the question guide used for the interviews with local authority staff is shown in Appendix 4.

Student interviews

The final stage of the *impact study* was an in depth exploration of student experiences using face to face semi-structured interviews.

The proposed interview sample was 48 students; half of the sample to be care leavers and half from low income or first generation backgrounds. These were to be selected from those individuals who indicated in the initial internet questionnaire that they would be willing to participate further in the study. Sixty-five students describing themselves as care leavers indicated in the questionnaire they would be interested in further participation in the study. These students were contacted using the email and/ or telephone details supplied to ask if they still wished to participate. They were supplied with a participant information sheet giving further information about the study, confirming the voluntary nature of their participation and assuring their anonymity. Direct contact with the students meant that their universities did not know they were participating in the study. A total of eighteen interviews were secured out of the 65 care leavers expressing an initial interest. Copies

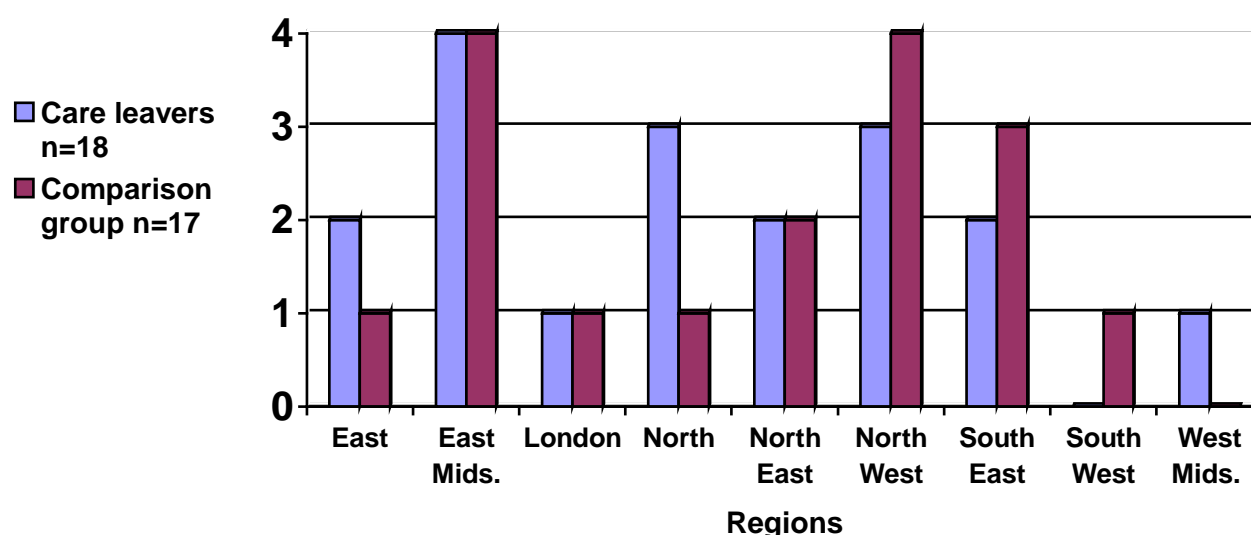
of the interview guides for care leavers and disadvantaged students and a copy of the participant information sheet are shown in Appendices 5 to 7.

The disadvantaged students were selected for interview, from those indicating they were willing to participate further in the study, using the questionnaire data on their gender, age, institution and degree course. The aim of selection amongst non care leavers was as far as possible, to achieve a similar range of age, type of institution and subject of study to the care leaver group.

Although it was not possible to entirely match the demographic characteristics of care leavers and those in the comparator group, a broad range of ages, institutions and subjects of study was achieved. A total of seventeen interviews were secured with students from either low income or first generation backgrounds.

The geographical spread by university of the interviews with care leavers and the comparison group of disadvantaged students is shown in Figure 2.4.4 below. Four interviews were undertaken with members of the care leaver and comparator groups in the East Midlands, making it the region where the highest number of interviews took place overall. The South West and West Midlands were the regions where the least interviews took place, with only one in each area.

Figure 2.4.4 Number of students interviewed by geographical region



The aim of the interviews with both care leavers and other disadvantaged students was to understand more about individuals' experiences of accessing support and to gain an insight into the issues that were important to individual students. The interviews enabled the students to express their opinions much more freely than would be possible in a questionnaire where questions address only issues that the researcher considers relevant. As with the interviews with support providers, the students were able to dictate the pace and direction of conversation. Beyond this, the researcher used a question guide to ensure that certain issues were covered. Exploring students' experiences in this way was expected to reveal common themes and issues across their accounts. Asking students to complete questionnaires and then inviting a number of respondents to be interviewed was also the approach used by Jackson and colleagues (2005) in their five year study of care leavers. The approach allowed basic information to be collected early on, leaving more time in the interviews to explore the issues in greater detail.

Piloting data collection instruments

Before starting data collection, the data collection instruments were piloted with the help of student support staff, a former director of social services and four care leavers with experience of higher education. The pilots resulted in a number of amendments being made to the instruments, including minor rewording and the addition of some further questions.

Analysis of data

The research generated a large volume of qualitative and quantitative data, so analysis began as soon as data became available. The quantitative data was initially explored using the Survey Monkey analysis tools, before being analysed using SPSS. The qualitative data was transcribed and analysed thematically. The transcripts were initially read through to re-familiarise the researcher with the data. Each transcript was then analysed to identify the broad issues and themes they contained. These themes were marked on the transcripts themselves and separate notes were also taken identifying in which transcripts themes occurred. This part of the analysis process was repeated several times to enable the researcher to go back and reconsider earlier transcripts as new themes emerged. Once a number of broad themes were established, the transcripts were re-analysed to explore those themes in greater depth. Sub-themes were marked on the transcripts and additional notes were again taken on how widely issues were represented across the samples. Examples of the broad themes which emerged from the interview data included, types of available support, disclosure and key supportive figures. Professional transcription services were used to transcribe a number of the interviews.

Methodological difficulties

It was anticipated that recruiting participants for the research would be a difficult process. Access was being sought to a group of students who were not readily identifiable by their institutions and who represented only a very

small percentage of the total student population in England. Although target numbers of participants and institutions were set, the need for flexibility was anticipated from the outset. Although the number of HEIs and students participating in semi-structured interviews was below the initial target, neither figure was greatly lower and a good spread was achieved in terms of geographical location and institution type covered. The number of local authority interviews achieved exceeded initial expectation.

The participation of student support staff was key to generate a large enough cross section of types of HEI for similarities and differences to be teased out from the data. Contacting the appropriate member of staff within student support by name where possible was a lengthy process due to the number of institutions approached, but considered necessary. The assistance of staff from AMOSSHE and OFFA in circulating the questionnaire provided an important boost to participation rates by drawing particular attention to the study amongst the regular flow of questionnaires circulating HEIs. This highlighted the value of ensuring organisations or individuals with a potential interest in the study were aware of its existence at an early stage.

The decision to circulate email rather than postal questionnaires was made in an attempt to minimise difficulties involved in access and recruitment. Although there is evidence that a higher response rate is obtained using the postal method (Jones 1999), it would have been impractical to post questionnaires to an entire student body. Also the nature of student life usually involves changing term time address each year, presenting its own problems in establishing the whereabouts of individuals. Email, however, is an established part of student communication and provided a means of reducing the effort required from student support staff in circulating the questionnaire to students.

It was initially intended to collect anonymised secondary data from HEIs on the support they provided to care leavers as part of the *mapping study*. HEIs were asked in the internet questionnaire if they collected this data and whether they would be willing to share it. However, it was found that very few

HEIs were collecting data on care leavers at that time and none were willing to release it.

Advisory group

To ensure that the approach to the research was rigorous throughout, and in particular the process of data collection and analysis, an advisory group was established with the assistance of Buttle UK. The purpose of the group was to help identify potentially relevant issues, to give feedback at various stages of the research including on the emerging findings and to be a source of assistance in identifying and overcoming any practical difficulties encountered. The group met once a year throughout the course of the research and was attended by representatives of key organisations. Two care leavers were initially asked to join the group, but were unable to attend at the last minute. It was subsequently decided that it would be more appropriate to approach individual care leavers for assistance as and when required rather than expecting them to travel to advisory group meetings in London on a regular basis.

A research summary will be produced for Buttle UK and members of the advisory group. Appendix 8 contains a list of organisations represented on the advisory group.

Ethical issues and research governance

Ethical approval was obtained from the University Ethics Committee prior to fieldwork commencing. The research was carried out in accordance with the Department of Health Research Governance Framework for Health and Social Care. Ethical consent was also obtained from the Association of Directors of Children's Services in relation to the participation of local authority staff.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants in the research and they were provided with participant information sheets outlining the nature of the

study and explaining the extent of their participation. Interview participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time. All participants were made aware that their anonymity would be protected. A copy of the informed consent form is attached at Appendix 9.

Participants were informed that in the event that they disclosed any matters of a criminal nature, the researcher would be obliged to inform the relevant authorities.

Consent to the electronic recording of telephone and the face to face interviews was sought at the start of every interview and was only not given by one student. Written notes were taken as an alternative in that instance.

Electronic data have been stored in encrypted files and hard copies and transcriptions have been stored in accordance with the university's ethical guidelines.

Because of the particular difficulty identifying care leavers and the relatively small sample, the researcher tried to be as flexible as possible in arranging interviews times and locations, subject to following the appropriate safety measures. The majority of interviews were carried out in cafes or in other locations on university campuses such as meeting or study rooms. In a small number of cases the interviews were carried out in the student's home. In all cases, the researcher's whereabouts were known to a contact person who was called at the end of each interview.

Using a multi-strategy approach

The research has incorporated a multi-strategy approach as this allows for the collection of different types of data to explore the issues most effectively. Some of the information available from HEIs and local authorities about their organisation and provision was factual and therefore most appropriately collected using quantitative instruments. However, more in depth data was best obtained using qualitative strategies, for example, by interviewing student

support staff. Likewise, collecting data from students was best achieved using a mix of qualitative and quantitative strategies to establish both factual background and rich personal accounts. The benefit of a multi-strategy technique is that it produces a more comprehensive picture of the phenomenon than selecting a single strategy. Using complementary techniques also extends the breadth and depth of data that it is feasible to collect within a study of this scale. Additionally, the quantitative data informed the qualitative, as data from the questionnaires helped provide context to the in depth interviews with individual providers and recipients of support, which were the main focus of the study.

Overall, collecting data from more than one source as well as using quantitative and qualitative methods has given a richer, more robust account of what is occurring.

Comparing care leavers with students from other disadvantaged backgrounds

A significant element of the research has involved comparing the experiences of care leavers with those of students from low income families and first generation students. Many of the support services and measures available to care leavers are not exclusively dedicated to them as a group but are universal in design; for example, counselling or study support. As higher education funding is limited, particularly in the present economic climate, institutions have to rationalise their services to meet the needs of multiple target groups. Jackson and colleagues (2005) identified key issues and concerns facing care leavers which they identified as also concerning other students. The main difference they found was that care leavers were more likely to face multiple and more severe difficulties.

The choice of students from low income families and first generation students as a comparator group was made because they are referred to specifically in widening participation policy as students from non-traditional backgrounds who should be targeted by widening participation measures (HEFCE 2007).

Care leavers are themselves also likely to fall within these groups in addition to their status as care leavers. One would therefore expect to see an overlap in the support needs and issues experienced across all three groups. Examining the overlap will help identify gaps in support where care leavers would benefit from discrete provision. The Buttle UK Quality Mark is one such initiative highlighting and encouraging institutions to fill the gaps in the support experienced by care leavers.

5 Conclusion

The aim of this research was to understand the issues from the perspectives of the main protagonists.

Understanding the impact of policy developments and support initiatives on the lives of care leavers required a methodology exploring multiple perspectives. Support providers are required to make judgements on how best to fulfil their duties towards care leavers within their particular organisational setting. Care leavers in higher education also represent only a fraction of the total number of students requiring support at any given HEI. As a result, supporting care leavers in practice is unlikely to be a straightforward process. It is therefore important to delve as deeply as possible into the perspectives of support providers, going beyond the support offered on paper. The exact same is true when exploring the provision of support from local authorities. Care leavers in higher education are only a small proportion of all the care leavers for whom local authorities are responsible. Every local authority has its own approach to support and individual staff will have their own ways of working. Collecting rich data will help in understanding how this support process works.

Students in higher education attend different institutions with their own characteristics, and beyond that, individual students have their own unique experience. Their individual circumstances will impact on their experience and perspective as much, if not more than their surroundings do. Engaging with individuals holding different perspectives increases the scope and depth of

the research. As Becker and Bryman (2004) state “Looking at issues from [different individuals’] points of view allows the contrasting positions to come across.”

Finally, the research is not intended to represent every perspective on the issues explored as that would be an impossible task. Instead it is an attempt to capture a snapshot of the range of situations experienced by a sample of care leavers and those involved in providing them with support between 2008 and 2010. By doing this, it is possible to gauge how far support and initiatives such as the Buttle UK Quality Mark have succeeded in improving individuals’ experiences.

Chapter 3

The HEI perspective of care leaver support

1 Introduction

Chapter 1 explored the role of widening participation in higher education. It described how successive governments realised the benefits of widened access to education: as a means of meeting the labour needs of a modern economy and by increasing opportunity, as graduates on average, are estimated to earn £100,000 more in the course of a lifetime than an individual with Level 3 qualifications such as A Levels (HEFCE 2007). The chapter described how in recent years, widening participation policy has become an integral part of higher education provision. The requirement for HEIs to declare their support provision for low income students as a condition of charging above the basic level of tuition fee is an example of this (OFFA 2010). However, only 6% of care leavers are currently estimated to enter higher education, making them a greatly under-represented group despite efforts to widen participation amongst those from non traditional backgrounds (Department for Education 2011). Chapter 1 also introduced Bourdieu's theory on the reproduction and transformation of class structures within society and the roles of *field*, *habitus* and *capital* in determining an individual's movement within that structure.

This chapter considers how HEIs are supporting care leavers to access and build up their levels of *social, cultural and economic capital* and in doing so enabling them to improve their positions within society. The chapter, together with Chapter 4 considering the support provided to care leavers by local authorities, provides a background context for exploring care leavers' experiences of higher education. This chapter will consider the range of

support available from HEIs; what student support staff recognise as the problems and challenges faced by care leavers in higher education; and the issues staff face in developing and delivering support provision in practice. It will also explore the impact of the Buttle UK Quality Mark, introduced as a result of the *Going to University from Care* study (Jackson and colleagues 2005) and awarded to universities demonstrating an ongoing commitment to care leavers.

2 The data

This chapter draws on data collected from student support staff at HEIs across England. The study design involved circulation of an internet questionnaire to HEIs seeking information on the range of support available to care leavers and other disadvantaged students. A total of 50 HEIs returned the questionnaire and 18 (36%) of those respondents agreed to a follow up telephone interview to discuss their provision in greater depth. Table 3.2.1 below provides a breakdown of the questionnaire respondents based on their own descriptions of their roles within HEIs. Twenty-seven (54%) of those staff completing the questionnaire described their position as Director/ Head of Service or senior manager within student support or widening participation. Twenty-three respondents (46%) described their role as being a student adviser/ officer responsible for the day to day provision of student support. Nine of the student advisers/ officers (18%) described their roles as involving specific responsibility for care leavers or being the first point of contact for students from care backgrounds.

Table 3.2.1 Roles held by HEI staff completing the internet questionnaire

Roles held by staff completing the internet questionnaire	No of staff
Directors, Heads of Service or Senior Managers of Student Support/ Widening Participation	27 (54%)
Advisers/ Officers responsible for day to day provision	23 (46%)
Advisers/ Officers with specific responsibility for care leavers or providing a first point of contact for students with care backgrounds	9 (18%)

N=50

The perspectives of staff involved in the day to day provision of support and those concerned with support at a more strategic level are therefore evenly represented amongst the questionnaire respondents.

From the 50 HEIs completing the initial questionnaire, 32 (64%) held the Buttle UK Quality Mark, were applying for it or considering making an application. As a result, there may be some bias in the data due to the percentage of respondents recognising a need to support care leavers.

Table 3.2.2 below shows that of the 18 respondents who agreed to take part in a follow up telephone interview, ten (56%) described themselves as Directors/ Heads of Service or senior managers within student support or widening participation and eight (44%) were student advisers/ officers involved in day to day provision of student support. Four of the student advisers/ officers interviewed (22%) described their roles as involving specific responsibility for care leavers or as providing a first point of contact for students with care backgrounds.

Table 3.2.2 Roles held by HEI staff participating in a telephone interview

Roles held by staff participating in a telephone interview	No of staff
Directors, Heads of Service or Senior Managers of Student Support/ Widening Participation	10 (56%)
Advisers/ Officers responsible for day to day provision	8 (44%)
Advisers/ Officers with specific responsibility for care leavers or providing a first point of contact for students with care backgrounds	4 (22%)

N= 18

The telephone interview sample therefore also provides a good mix of staff perspectives, reflecting the views of both staff in management positions and student support advisers responsible for day to day support provision.

A full description of the sample and response rates was discussed in Chapter 2, including a breakdown of respondents by type of HEI.

3 How have HEIs arrived at their present level of support for care leavers?

Before exploring the support currently available to care leavers from HEIs, it is useful to consider how we have arrived at this level of provision, as it may have implications for the future development of support.

The wider policy context

Chapter 1 explored how widening participation in higher education became a fundamental element of the New Labour government's policies designed to address inequality in society. New Labour was seen as moving children, "from

the margins to the heart of social policy” with education playing a key role (Lister 2006, p321). As part of its attempts to widen participation in higher education, the then government set a target of 50% of people under the age of 30 being in higher education before 2010 (Blunkett 2000). Although this target was later abandoned, it can be argued that the government did succeed in embedding widening participation in higher education. Its legacy can be seen in the use of Access Agreements and the new national scholarship programme.

Currently, HEIs have no statutory obligation to support care leavers as a specific target group for widening participation and they receive no ring fenced government funding for that purpose. By contrast, they do have a statutory duty to assist other groups of students such as those with disabilities who have a legal right to support under the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act 2001 (HMSO 2001). However, since the publication of *Going to University from Care* (Jackson and colleagues 2005), there has been a growing awareness of care leavers as a particularly disadvantaged group of students within higher education. This growing awareness was referred to by one HEI staff member,

“From my own perspective, I didn’t know anything about looked after young people and the media version of what they’re like isn’t very good.... and it doesn’t take much exposure to work out that it’s not the case at all. They’re just young people who have been completely failed by their families and in many cases, they are in the process of being failed by the state.” (S16, pre 1992 HEI)

The degree of disadvantage identified by Jackson and colleagues (2005) is one possible reason why HEIs have chosen to address the needs of this group. Other factors which may have influenced HEIs’ decisions to establish provision aimed at care leavers include the fact that care leavers in higher education form only a small proportion of the entire student population. Consequently, the overall cost of providing bursaries or other support is relatively low. However, some of the student support staff interviewed in the

course of this study described how supporting care leavers required significant levels of time and resources, especially considering the small number of students benefiting.

“We’re quite a resource intensive team really. I’m sure it won’t last.... someone will spot it at some point.” (S6, post 1992 HEI)

The impact of market competition cannot be ignored as a factor in why HEIs support care leavers. HEIs are businesses reliant upon profile and image to attract students and investment. It is important that they are not eclipsed by their competitors, and providing high standards of student welfare and promoting positive student experience play a part in this. If an institution introduces a new element of support, its neighbouring institutions and competitors are likely to want to offer a similar package. The concept of the Buttle UK Quality Mark taps into this idea as it provides public recognition of HEIs’ efforts.

The foundations for supporting care leavers have therefore existed for a number of years as widening participation has become integral to higher education policy. An increasing awareness of care leavers as a group within higher education following publication of the *Going to University from Care* report (Jackson and colleagues 2005), the degree of disadvantage revealed by that study and the relatively small number of students concerned are all potential factors in HEIs’ decisions to target care leavers for support. However, it should be noted that the data in this study was collected prior to the coalition government being elected and it is not yet clear what impact their policies and the cuts in government spending will have on care leaver support. One of the staff interviewed noted the uncertainty faced by HEIs and local authorities as to the future of their funding.

“One doesn’t know... HE funding changes..... we don’t know what government priorities will be. You just have to wait and see in a way.” (S10, post 1992 HEI)

Government statistics also show a variation across individual local authorities in the percentage of care leavers in higher education aged 19 years (Department for Education 2011a). HEIs situated in or near local authorities with a higher percentage of care leavers going to university may, therefore, have had greater experience of supporting care leavers, which in turn is likely to have impacted the development of their provision.

The Buttle UK Quality Mark

Buttle UK, a charity supporting children in need which commissioned the Jackson research, introduced the Quality Mark in 2006 to award HEIs demonstrating an ongoing commitment to supporting care leavers. The specific criteria that HEIs need to fulfil to gain the Quality Mark were discussed in Chapter 1. The Quality Mark has so far been awarded to over 60 HEIs in England suggesting that it is having some impact on the way HEIs target care leavers for support (Buttle UK 2011a). What this impact may be will be considered in detail later in this chapter.

The role of student support staff in the development of care leaver support

The preceding sections describe the impact policy, competition in the higher education market and research evidence may have had on the levels of support available to care leavers from HEIs. However, interviews with student support staff suggest that their enthusiasm and approach has also been a key factor in the expansion of that support.

Student support staff described how, once they became aware of the level of disadvantage faced by care leavers, they made the decision to target this group of students for support with ease. Staff also had little difficulty selling the idea to colleagues once they informed them of the potential implications of coming from a care background.

“It was a very easy thing to do actually. The very senior management saw it as a very straightforward thing to do. They wondered why we weren’t already doing it.” (S6, post 1992 HEI)

The interviews with staff revealed significant levels of enthusiasm for developing effective packages of support provision for care leavers. Student support staff at one HEI decided to delay applying for the Buttle UK Quality Mark until they felt their support package was sufficiently established.

“I think part of it was professional integrity. We didn’t just want a badge because we’d written a plan. It felt a bit disingenuous. I think we wanted to show.... It’s a mark for commitment.... We wanted to demonstrate commitment, not just intent to commit.” (S1, post 1992 HEI)

As the concept of care leaver support was relatively new, it provided the opportunity for student support staff to have a sense of ownership over the provision developed. The lack of legislation laying out defined objectives and mechanisms for support allowed student support staff the freedom to use their own experience and knowledge to develop support packages.

One member of student support staff commented on a regional network meeting between staff from a number of HEIs set up to discuss best practice in care leaver support.

“People are trying to hit the ground running by learning from other people’s best practice and I think that’s unusual. I haven’t seen that happening in any other area. I think there was a great appetite for sharing there. Everyone was really happy to share everything they had and I’ve never heard so much noise in a meeting like that. It was really good because everyone was at different stages.” (S16, pre 1992 HEI)

This demonstrates an appetite for collaborative working by student support staff alongside colleagues from other HEIs. Other examples of collaborative

working referred to by student support staff included running regional aspiration raising events and producing printed information for care leavers about HEIs within a single region. Outcomes of such collaboration include two guides compiled by HEIs in the Midlands and Northern England summarising support provision for care leavers across a number of institutions (EMCLASS 2011, NorthCLASS 2011).

Many student support staff valued the chance to share ideas with colleagues at other HEIs in a manner that was unusual between otherwise competing institutions.

“It’s nice to think that we’re all part of the [Buttle UK] Quality Mark. We have that in common and we’re all working for a common goal, which isn’t directly related to student recruitment and intake and targets and all that sort of thing. I think it’s nice to think that you are part of something that’s a bit bigger.” (S18, pre 1992 HEI)

The staff interviewed were focused on providing the best advice to potential applicants from care backgrounds, rather than solely marketing their own institution.

“I let [care leavers] know what we have here and if they don’t feel that [the university] is right for them, I tell them perhaps a good thing would be to look out for the Buttle UK Quality Mark..... I say, ‘But don’t just think that if the university hasn’t got the award it won’t have the support in place. They may be working towards it, putting the support in.’” (S5, post 1992 HEI)

Staff at another HEI were looking into providing a link to the Buttle UK website from their own institutional webpage, fully aware this might lead people to apply for courses elsewhere. The level of altruism displayed by staff may be a reflection of the degree of disadvantage faced by care leavers. The fact that care leavers represent only a very small proportion of the overall student

population may also reduce the pressure on HEIs to compete with one another for their business and enable neighbouring institutions to co-operate.

4 Embedding care leaver support

Student support staff were very aware of the risks to care leaver provision, particularly in the current climate of cuts in higher education funding, and this made embedding support a priority. One staff member was very clear about the approach they had taken to ensure the longevity of their support,

“It’s serious, embedded, and it will survive a change of staff or a change of team or a change of finances, and it’s serious and it has to be done properly in the same way that you’d embed anything else, for example disability support. So we try and piggy back a lot of our support onto other things where possible, but I think there are certain key areas where care leavers need a different kind of support” (S3, post 1992 HEI)

All but one of the student support staff interviewed had assumed care leaver responsibilities in addition to their existing workloads, meaning that care leavers represented only a small part of their overall remits.

“It’s normally tagged on to somebody’s role in terms of outreach, a small part of somebody’s role, and it’s like you have to absorb it alongside all the other things you are doing.” (S18, pre 1992 HEI)

Provision may therefore be vulnerable to staff movement, particularly if the new staff member does not share their predecessor’s enthusiasm for this area of support.

Staff at two HEIs were conscious of the potentially negative impact on care leaver support of an institution’s need to focus on meeting any statutory duties ahead of other provision.

“I think what often happens is things that you really have to spend a lot of time on are things which are the statutory regulatory stuff. So, for example, when immigration rules change, the points based system, when student funding regulations change, that’s where all our resource priorities go.” (S10, post 1992 HEI)

Until care leaver support is firmly embedded within the consciousness of students and staff and is expected of HEIs, or its existence is put on a statutory footing, current achievements could be easily undermined. During a period of significant cuts to higher education funding, relatively unfamiliar support aimed at small numbers of students, which HEIs are under no statutory obligation to provide, is very likely to suffer if efficiencies have to be made.

5 The impact of support provision on care leavers’ levels of *social, economic and cultural capital*

Chapter 1 discussed the likelihood of care leavers experiencing negative outcomes as adults, including homelessness and unemployment (Wade and Dixon 2006). In relation to Bourdieu’s theories, these outcomes form the probable life course trajectory of young people from care backgrounds (Bourdieu 1984). The care leavers who reach higher education have, therefore, already succeeded in deviating a substantial distance from their expected pathway.

The support available to care leavers who enter higher education is therefore important to help them continue to move away from the trajectory expected of individuals with care backgrounds. By helping care leavers build up their levels of *social, cultural and economic capital*, HEIs are helping increase the opportunities available to them, which will improve their lives. Support provision can potentially help care leavers to build their *capital* in a number of ways. Outreach provision such as aspiration raising events will positively influence an individual’s *habitus*, or disposition by introducing them to new opportunities and experiences and by increasing their levels of expectation.

Outreach events such as campus visits will help make the *field of higher education* more familiar, so care leavers feel more at home and entitled to be in that environment as undergraduates. The support aimed at care leavers can in itself represent *capital*. For example, a bursary payment is a form of *economic capital*, enabling a care leaver to benefit from the opportunities available to him or her whilst in higher education. Support also provides the tools to access further *capital*. For example, having a named member of support staff to contact for advice provides information and access to other forms of support or *capital*.

The combination of positively influencing a care leaver's *habitus*, familiarising them with the *field of higher education*, and providing them with, or giving them access to additional *capital*, may all help to compensate for deficits in support caused by the absence of birth parents. As a result, it is more likely that the individual care leaver will continue on their new life course trajectory by making the most of the opportunities open to them in higher education.

However, in Munro and colleagues' (2010) evaluation of the Staying Put Pilot, intended to give young people the opportunity to remain with carers until the age of 21, it was found that care leavers already in possession of the highest levels of *capital* were more likely to engage with Staying Put than those with the least *capital*. For example, care leavers who were in some form of education, employment or training, or had an established attachment to foster carers were more likely to access Staying Put than the most vulnerable care leavers who were disengaged from education and had fewer secure attachments. In terms of implications for the care leavers in the current study, this may mean that those care leavers who possess the most *capital* such as a generous financial package from their local authority and the continued encouragement of foster parents are the most likely to engage with support services in higher education, further increasing their levels of *economic, social or cultural capital*. Care leavers who have made it into higher education without the encouragement or support of others, or older care leavers who have aged out of eligibility to aftercare provision from their local authority may be less likely to access support even though they are in greatest need.

Whether this is the case will be considered in Chapter 6 which will explore the experiences of care leavers. This possibility highlights the importance of raising awareness of care leaver support within the student population, developing systems for engaging with as many care leavers as possible and removing barriers or deterrents to accessing support. Otherwise, HEIs and local authorities risk supporting only the least disadvantaged care leavers and failing to support those most in need.

6 The structure of care leaver support

This chapter has so far focused on the reasons why HEIs have targeted care leavers for support and the role of student support staff in the development of that provision. The remainder of this chapter explores the structure of care leaver support at the HEIs in the sample and how provision of that support works in practice from the perspectives of student support staff. Chapter 4 will consider the provision of support by local authorities from the perspective of social care staff. Together, these chapters build a picture of two key sources of support for care leavers in higher education and provides a context for understanding care leavers' experiences of higher education and how they build up their levels of *social, economic and cultural capital*.

Although each HEI had its own structure for widening participation and student support, staff generally described two phases of provision. The first phase involved outreach activities: widening participation programmes such as summer schools, taster days and school visits. The second phase involved support received by students during the application process and once on course. Responsibility for care leavers was therefore generally shared between staff responsible for outreach/widening participation and on course support. Consequently, co-operation was required where students became known through outreach events and activities and subsequently obtained a place at that HEI to avoid care leavers becoming lost in the system or not being identified for support.

The structure of outreach provision

A significant amount of outreach and widening participation work was described by student support staff, which attempted to raise aspirations amongst school age children coming from backgrounds where historically higher education was unusual. Some of this work was aimed at disadvantaged young children generally, whilst some was targeted specifically at looked after children. The AimHigher programme, in particular, was described by interviewees as playing a key role in provision. AimHigher was funded by HEFCE as part of its strategic aim to “promote and provide the opportunity of successful participation in HE to everyone who can benefit from it” (HEFCE 2009, p18). This funding helped provide events such as summer schools and campus visits to raise aspiration amongst young people. Student support staff described being involved in outreach work in conjunction with AimHigher, other HEIs and schools. The partners shared responsibility for identifying potential participants, facilitating attendance and running events. One HEI was involved with two other local universities in jointly running tasters and activities for looked after children in Years 10 and 11.

“So we were funded through AimHigher to do that We did put a little bit of our own funding into it, but the majority has come from AimHigher and that was really our starting point for getting involved in that.... and that’s led to everything else we have provided for applicants.” (S14, Russell Group HEI)

The AimHigher programme was closed in July 2011 and the Higher Education White Paper, *Students at the Heart of the System* refers to a new framework being established placing greater responsibility on HEIs to widen participation (BIS 2011d). Under this framework, HEIs are expected to draw upon the good practice developed under AimHigher. Williams (2011) argues that the current changes following the Browne Review of higher education funding (Browne 2010), mark a reduction of government interference in higher education which had increased when the principle of mass higher education emerged in the early 1990s. Developments such as the closure of AimHigher and the

introduction of the new Higher Education White Paper can therefore be seen as part of wider funding changes in higher education, where the state's involvement is being rolled back and provision becomes more market driven. It is not yet known how current changes to the funding of higher education outlined in the White Paper and in response to the Browne Review will impact on outreach provision.

In order to discover the range of support provision offered by HEIs across England, staff were asked as part of the internet questionnaire to identify the different types of outreach activity they undertook and who it was aimed at. Table 3.6.1 below shows that out of the 50 HEIs responding to the questionnaire, the majority ran a range of activities aimed at pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. Thirty-four (68%) of the 50 participating HEIs arranged for staff or students to visit schools and talk to pupils, 32 (64%) ran taster days, 31 (62%) ran summer schools and 30 (60%) had mentoring schemes.

In relation to provision aimed at looked after children, 23 out of 50 HEIs (46%) reported having a specific policy of support for care leavers. Thirty out the 50 HEIs (60%) provided some form of outreach activity aimed specifically at looked after children. Twenty-four HEIs (48%) worked with local authorities, 19 (38%) ran taster days, 14 (28%) ran summer schools and 13 (26%) operated mentoring schemes. Only five (10%) visited schools to talk to pupils from care backgrounds.

Table 3.6.1 The range of outreach activities across HEIs and students targeted

Type of outreach activity	Number of participating HEIs	
	Aimed at pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds	Aimed at looked after children
Summer schools	31 (62%)	14 (28%)
Taster days	32 (64%)	19 (38%)
School visits	34 (68%)	5 (10%)
Mentoring	30 (60%)	13 (26%)
Working with LAs	29 (58%)	24 (48%)
Other	11 (22%)	11 (22%)

N=50

Table 3.6.1 shows that when targeting disadvantaged students generally, taster days, school visits, mentoring and working with local authorities were similar in their popularity. Greater differences were found when comparing the popularity of different outreach activities aimed at looked after children. Here, taster days and working with local authorities were the most common forms of activity, with the least popular being visits to schools. One reason why school visits are unpopular when targeting looked after children may be because this is an impractical way of identifying and contacting individuals who may be spread across a large number of schools. Student support staff confirmed they relied heavily upon the involvement of local authorities in identifying individual looked after children and in running events such as summer schools for children in local authority care. By working directly with local authorities to raise aspirations amongst their looked after children, HEIs avoided having to use school visits to target small numbers of looked after children spread across a number of establishments.

The structure of 'on course' support

Once care leavers had applied and been accepted by HEIs, student support staff described trying to avoid treating these students differently from others by as far as possible meeting their support needs through *universal support* using existing support structures.

"I think we have to tread quite carefully because we would be very edgy about stigmatising [care leavers]." (S15, pre 1992 HEI)

However, student support staff also identified a need for some *discrete support* specifically targeted at care leavers. The most common forms of *discrete support* identified by student support staff were care leaver bursaries or similar payments, 365 day accommodation and named contacts. All of these support types were identified by Buttle UK as necessary for HEIs to demonstrate their commitment to supporting care leavers, which would explain their popularity at least amongst those HEIs holding or in the process of applying for the Quality Mark (Buttle UK 2011b). The data does not show whether the HEIs had introduced these forms of support as a direct consequence of applying for the Quality Mark. These elements of provision address fundamental aspects of support which would normally be the responsibility of birth parents: having somewhere to live year round, ensuring individuals have access to sufficient money and having someone to turn to for help or advice.

In addition, some institutions provided a third category of provision in the form of *enhanced support*. Examples of *enhanced support* included unlimited numbers of counselling sessions, reduced cost freshers' week tickets and enhanced careers advice. These represented 'add-ons' to *universal support* and were available either solely to care leavers or to other specific groups of students such as those with disabilities.

The internet questionnaire asked student support staff to identify the different types of on course support provided universally to students at their

institutions, and those provided specifically to care leavers. Table 3.6.2 below shows that out of the 50 HEIs responding to the questionnaire, 49 (98%) offered some form of bursary or financial support for students generally, 47 (94%) provided counselling or emotional support, 37 (74%) provided students with a named adviser for discussing non academic issues and 33 (66%) provided mentoring schemes for existing students. In relation to on course support targeted specifically at care leavers, 38 HEIs (76%) offered some form of support. Thirty HEIs (60%) provided bursaries or financial support, 28 (56%) HEIs offered a named adviser for discussing non academic issues, 22 (44%) provided 365 day accommodation and 17 (34%) provided counselling or emotional support targeted at care leavers.

Table 3.6.2 The range of on course support across HEIs and students targeted

Type of support	Number of participating HEIs	
	Targeted at students generally	Targeted at care leavers
Bursaries/financial support	49 (98%)	30 (60%)
Mentoring schemes for existing students	33 (66%)	12 (24%)
365 day accommodation	16 (32%)	22 (44%)
Named adviser for discussing non-academic issues	37 (74%)	28 (56%)
Counselling/emotional support	47 (94%)	17 (34%)
None	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
Other	12 (24%)	12 (24%)

N=50

Table 3.6.2 shows that 365 day accommodation is the only form of on course support which HEIs are more likely to offer discretely to care leavers than as part of their universal provision for students. The prevalence of 365 day accommodation as a form of discrete care leaver provision may reflect the

fact that the majority of undergraduate students are expected to return to their families during vacation periods. By comparison, one of the key findings of the *Going to University from Care* study (Jackson and colleagues 2005) was the risk to care leavers of finding themselves homeless during vacation periods. Buttle UK also incorporated provision of vacation accommodation into their 'Higher Education Commitment to Care Leavers' which HEIs must comply with to obtain the Buttle UK Quality Mark (Buttle UK 2011b).

It is important that care leavers are able to access forms of on course support as part of their HEI's universal provision, as this support is not dependent upon a care leaver disclosing their care background to their institution. However, accessing support aimed specifically at care leavers may lead to higher levels of support becoming available. For example, a care leaver may be eligible for a means tested payment from the Access to Learning Fund as part of a HEI's universally available support, but could additionally be eligible for a care leaver bursary if they have disclosed their care background and accessed the discrete support available.

7 The impact of type of HEI on the support available to care leavers

Chapter 1 discussed the different approaches taken to widening participation by HEIs and how these approaches could vary depending upon type of institution, for example, whether an HEI is more or less selective in nature. Because of their popularity, the most prestigious institutions will have less need to market themselves to potential applicants from non traditional and less advantaged backgrounds in order to fill their places. There is therefore less pressure on them to provide extensive student support, which is a potential disadvantage to those students from non traditional backgrounds who attend selective HEIs. Meanwhile, less prestigious HEIs needing to fill places have to cast their nets more widely to encourage applicants from less traditional backgrounds. However, because of their need to attract students from all backgrounds to fill up courses, marketing HEIs are likely to become very experienced in meeting students' support needs and develop very comprehensive student support provision as a result. A potentially negative

consequence of attracting a large number of students from non traditional backgrounds is the cost implication of providing support. As yet, it is unknown how meeting this cost will impact on HEIs under the new system of higher education funding and increased tuition fees, although there are fears that some HEIs whose populations are made up of a high percentage of students from disadvantaged backgrounds could be at serious financial risk and even struggle to survive in part because of the costs associated with supporting disadvantaged students. The University and College Union calculates that 27 HEIs, all post 1992 institutions are at very high or high risk of negative impacts from the changes to funding (UCU 2010).

The interview data was tested to see whether there was an association between the type of HEI and whether it provided certain elements of care leavers support. These were care leavers bursaries, a named contacts for care leavers and 365 day accommodation. No significant association was found between type of HEI and offering a care leaver bursary ($\chi^2 = 1.50$, DF=3, p=0.681). There was also no significant association between HEI type and whether a named contact was provided to care leavers ($\chi^2 = 1.82$, DF=3, p=0.612), or between HEI type and offering 365 day accommodation ($\chi^2 = 2.52$, DF=3, p=0.472). Post 1992 institutions were no more likely to provide these forms of support than the Russell Group or pre 1992 institutions. However, the questionnaire data may only tell half the story. The in depth interviews with student support staff described their approaches to supporting care leavers, and suggest a distinction between different types of HEI and their widening participation ethos. For example, one HEI staff member from a post 1992 university stated that it had not been difficult to secure funding and resources from university management to support care leavers because of the institution's strong widening participation ethos. Another staff member from an older institution talking about staff awareness, thought they had less of a widening participation focus saying,

“.....so there’s a sense in which [widening participation is] not an issue on our radar organisationally, so overall staff awareness isn’t high.”
(S11, pre 1992 HEI)

This HEI instead organised its provision so that there was a specific group of people with awareness of widening participation issues, to whom other staff would turn when required. This difference in approach may be explained by the distinction between selective and marketing institutions referred to above. The early 1990s saw the evolution of mass higher education and the significant development of widening participation. However, despite the availability of government funding encouraging HEIs to introduce widening participation measures, the most prestigious HEIs have been less successful in opening their doors to students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Public Accounts Committee 2009; Reay and colleagues 2010; Sutton Trust 2011). Selective HEIs are under some pressure to demonstrate their widening participation credentials to avoid negative publicity such as that recently generated by the very small number of black students admitted to Oxbridge (Guardian 2010) and to fulfil OFFA’s requirements for an Access Agreement enabling HEIs to charge above the basic level for tuition fees. However, their ability to be selective depends upon their continuing prestige to attract funding and the best students. In Bourdieu’s terms, attending selective or prestigious HEIs confers high levels of *cultural capital* on students. However, this *cultural capital* exists only so long as society continues to value and aspire to the educational experience at those HEIs. To maintain this level of prestige and attraction, HEIs need to ensure they remain exclusive. Opening up admission through widening participation is therefore a potential risk to that exclusivity. In effect, those with high levels of *capital* are seeking to control who acquires that *capital* in order to maintain its value and aspirational quality. This explains why although selective HEIs may on one level provide a range of measures designed to support widening participation, on another level, it is not in their long-term interests to make themselves any less exclusive by pushing those measures.

It is likely that the overall ethos of an institution will impact upon the experience of care leavers. Using the example above, an institution where widening participation does not feature greatly on the radar may make students more reluctant to approach staff for help than an institution where all staff are expected to have some understanding of student support.

Another noticeable divide between types of HEI is in the applicants they expect to appeal to. Some older HEIs saw factors such as their grade requirements and range of courses as potential deterrents to care leavers.

“....but I think one of the problems we have here at [] is that our required grades are actually extremely high, for example, for English you now need three As to get a place and that means that both our widening participation students, who come from quite difficult backgrounds and difficult schools to achieve those grades, plus the care leavers do tend to find it quite hard and quite daunting and although they may be catching up during their college years they often won't aspire, however bright they are, to coming to somewhere like [] and a lot of our AimHigher students end up at [the local newer university] with their slightly lower entrance requirements.” (S7, pre 1992 HEI)

There was also a belief expressed by staff from both older and newer HEIs that care leavers were more likely to go to their local HEI than apply for courses in other parts of the country. This may, in part, be down to HEIs being most effectively able to target their widening participation resources in their local areas or regions, and because projects with agencies responsible for raising educational aspirations are mostly undertaken on a local basis for logistical reasons.

“It's all about focusing our energies. I think for the amount of people that you touch, the amount of effort that goes into [publicising care leaver support nationally, it] doesn't pay off.” (S1, post 1992 HEI)

Within the sample of care leavers interviewed, those who applied to their local universities did so because of family commitments. Limitations of the current sample meant that it was not possible to explore this issue further.

Although there were selective HEIs within the sample that were very proactive in their support of care leavers and marketing HEIs who had not really considered care leavers as a target for support, the interview data does provide overall support to the hypothesis that type of institution affects the way support is provided to care leavers. The newer institutions within the sample described a more hands on approach to support, building relationships between staff and students and maintaining that contact. There was a greater expectation amongst newer HEIs in the sample that staff beyond the student support department should have some awareness of care leavers and of the possible implications of coming from a care background.

The remainder of the chapter focuses on the provision of support in practice and the issues faced by staff developing and delivering this support.

8 Provision of support in practice

Definition of a care leaver

HEIs need to decide upon their definition of the term 'care leaver' in order to identify those individuals eligible to receive support. The parameters of this definition have obvious implications for the number of students receiving support. Whereas local authorities are required to comply with the definition set out in the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, which was discussed in Chapter 1, HEIs have discretion to decide on the breadth of their definition. The student support staff interviewed valued this flexibility and felt it allowed them to be more responsive to the individual needs of students and to direct support to where, in their experience, they thought it would be of greatest benefit.

“We didn’t want to say ‘you have to spend x amount of time in public care’. We’ve not been as straight as that... but we’re very comfortable with doing that. We said we’d review it if loads of students came, but for now we’re very comfortable with keeping it like that.” (S8, Russell Group HEI)

Most of the support staff interviewed described being able to consider each individual’s eligibility for support on a case by case basis, in part because of the small number of care leavers currently disclosing their backgrounds. For the purposes of financial support, the majority of HEIs used a definition of care leaver roughly based on that in the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000. However, even where an individual fell outside of these criteria, most HEIs would still try to offer some form of support if they deemed it appropriate.

Student support staff described their HEIs having very clear needs led support strategies, rather than focusing on a specific age range or period of time spent in care as the basis for eligibility.

“We’re not very strict about what we classify as a care leaver. It’s not a label. It’s about what sort of support we need to provide for these people. I don’t think we’ll be going down a local authority model... like so many weeks before their sixteenth birthday...” (S15, pre 1992 HEI)

This approach permitted staff to consider the cases of other students including those with care backgrounds who may have aged out of the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 definition, but who still faced obstacles such as debt, as a direct result of their care backgrounds. Students who had become estranged from their families, or had been cared for by extended family members, for example by grandparents, without coming to the attention of children’s services were also mentioned by support staff as specific examples of those benefiting from a flexible definition of the term ‘care leaver’. The significance of this approach from the perspective of care leavers will be considered in Chapter 6.

Some student support staff described having significant discretion to award financial support, allowing them to offer funding to older students with care backgrounds, again reflecting a needs led approach.

“They are still going to be... not having the family support that other mature students, those who have delayed going into university would get, so I think there’s still a need to provide them with a tailored service.”
(S2, post 1992 HEI)

The discretion enjoyed by student support staff to address students’ needs as opposed to following rigid formulae for establishing support eligibility therefore enables HEIs to provide a safety net to students who do not have the support of their birth parents and may otherwise lack the *economic, social or cultural capital* of their peers.

Overall, a strength of the HEI approach is its ability to operate a combination of support. This could include care leaver support available to anyone falling within the institution’s definition of care leaver, and support available to individuals who may fall outside of the definition, but have been assessed as having support needs. However, once again in light of the changes currently being made to higher education funding this flexibility may no longer be possible. It is conceivable that in future, even support for those falling squarely within the care leaver definition will be subject to some form of means testing if budgets become restricted. For example, where care leavers are receiving generous support packages from their local authorities, HEIs may direct their support towards other care leavers receiving less comprehensive packages. However, such a development would undermine the notion that local authorities should do everything within their power to support care leavers and provide them with *economic, social or cultural capital*, just as a good parent would. It would create a situation where care leavers were penalised for the efforts of their local authorities to provide levels of support emulating the normative experience of higher education. In effect, HEIs would be placing a cap on the level of support available to care leavers when no such cap is placed upon support provided by birth parents. In terms

of the ability of care leavers to acquire forms of *capital* and improve their position in society, it would create a barrier limiting the distance care leavers could deviate from the expected life course trajectory of individuals from their social background.

Identifying care leavers for pre-arrival and on course support

Before student support staff can provide care leavers with support that will help them to build up their levels of *capital* and prepare them for the potentially unfamiliar *field of higher education*, they have to overcome the problem of identifying those students with care backgrounds.

One care leaver interviewed in this study talked about “a massive stigma attached to [being in care]”.

“I never discussed my home life at university. Nobody knew my home life at university.... even when I was at college.” (Elliot, aged 28, post 1992 HEI)

Care leavers may be reluctant to disclose their backgrounds because of this stigma (McMurray and colleagues 2010). For example, research evidence suggests there exists an assumption that looked after children are of inferior intelligence, and that they are in care, “because of personal deficit of character or behaviour” (Martin and Jackson 2002, p126). Going to university may be one of the first times in young peoples' lives they can choose to keep this information private.

Unless a care leaver becomes known to an HEI through participation in outreach or widening participation schemes and subsequently chooses to apply to that institution, HEI staff are entirely reliant upon students disclosing their care backgrounds. If a care leaver does not have the necessary *social capital* in the form of relationships, for example, with supportive carers or teachers who encourage and explain the implications of disclosure, they may fail to disclose and miss out on an opportunity to access support and build up

their *capital*. Their *habitus*, or disposition formed through life experience, makes it unlikely that they will expect support to be available, or feel entitled to ask for it. Until recently, the likelihood was that support staff would only become aware of a care leaver if they had a specific issue that made disclosing their background necessary, and once that issue had become sufficiently serious that the student could not deal with it alone. As one student support staff member noted, this is, “normally later in the year when things start to get tricky, rather than at the beginning” (S18, pre 1992 HEI). This leaves student support staff in the position of reacting to students’ problems, rather than helping to prevent them in the first place. The introduction of the care leaver tick box on the UCAS application form in 2008, gave care leavers a new opportunity to disclose their care backgrounds to HEIs during the university application process. The tick box, which was discussed in Chapter 1, alerts university admissions teams to students with care backgrounds prior to their arrival on campus. The majority of HEI’s involved in this study described having established systems where admissions teams alert student support that an applicant is a care leaver. Other HEIs were actively looking at introducing such a mechanism.

Following the introduction of the UCAS tick box, the decision to disclose a care background still rests with the care leaver, but where they do disclose, student support staff can make them aware of the range of support available from the outset.

“[People ticking the UACS box] are identified by the Admissions Office and that automatically triggers a letter. That letter is sent from Admissions, but is actually written by the Welfare Officer. It gives detail about the bursary and invites people to contact her so that she can look at getting the wheels in motion.” (S18, pre 1992 HEI)

This approach provides an opportunity for care leavers to immediately start accessing and building up *capital*.

The HEIs interviewed reported being at varying stages in using the UCAS tick box information and assessing its value to their admissions and support processes.

“[It has] enabled us to have a starting point which we... we’ve never had before and it’s enabled us to be proactive in contacting students at an early point in their transition to university, and I think timeliness is one of the main issues.” (S1, post 1992 HEI)

The overwhelming view was that the tick box was a positive addition to the UCAS application form and helped pre-identify at least a proportion of care leavers attending each HEI. The anticipated problem of large numbers of applicants ticking the UCAS box in error and the practical implications of identifying eligible care leavers had not materialised for those HEIs interviewed. Although every institution experienced a proportion of these errors, for many these amounted to single figures. HEI staff identified those who most frequently misunderstood the tick box as international students, students who were carers themselves and mature students with care backgrounds. Since amendment of the tick box in its second year to include a specified period of time in care, HEIs reported fewer mistakes being made. However, several HEI staff argued that the definition of care leaver should remain moderately wide as it allowed HEIs to establish their own parameters of eligibility for support. The potential importance of flexibility over who HEIs support has already been discussed in this chapter.

Making initial contact with care leavers and building supportive relationships

Students from all backgrounds need some form of network whilst in higher education to help them cope both academically and socially. This is particularly so if they are living away from home, or do not have family support. A support network, as a form of *social capital*, provides students with contacts to draw upon to help them overcome difficulties and make the most of their time in higher education.

The relationship formed between student support staff and care leavers will potentially be one of the most important in their support networks. This is particularly true early on in their time at university when they have yet to establish a circle of close friends to turn to for support. The process described by student support staff of identifying and making contact with care leavers therefore marks the beginning of a support relationship that could in theory continue until graduation. Once established, the relationship provides a doorway to access additional *capital* such as financial support, or being put in touch with others who can provide support such as counsellors.

Those students identified as having care backgrounds, either through the UCAS tick box or through participation in outreach activities, were generally contacted by HEIs before they arrived at the start of term. This contact, either by letter or telephone, provided student support staff with an opportunity to introduce themselves and to begin letting students know about available support. It was described by one HEI staff member as a, "...pivotal point in the support that we offer" (S1, post 1992 HEI). Some HEIs additionally forwarded students a questionnaire to assess their support needs and to encourage students themselves to consider any issues they had. Making contact before care leavers arrived on campus was key as it provided an opportunity to ask questions and allay any fears and anxieties.

"The idea is that [the staff] want to provide as much support as possible in advance to reassure the person in the process of application, confirmation and arriving." (S11, pre 1992 HEI)

Care leavers who lack *social capital* in the form of a close relationship with a carer or social worker, may not have had an opportunity up until this point to discuss their concerns about funding, accommodation or their studies. This illustrates one of the major disadvantages faced by students who do not have the support of birth parents during this unsettling period of their lives. A number of HEIs invited care leavers to make contact with them, often using a bursary or other financial support as a form of 'carrot' to help set up a face to

face meeting. This meeting enabled staff to discuss possible support, begin to make arrangements where the student wanted assistance, and agree what level of ongoing contact would be maintained. At this initial stage, HEIs also addressed the issue of confidentiality, which will be considered later in this chapter.

Inviting care leavers to attend pre-arrival preparation programmes, or to make contact about support far in advance of the start of term resulted in limited success, perhaps because the immediacy of issues was a key motivating factor for young people. This is significant as care leavers may be missing out on an opportunity to gain *capital* in the form of information and contacts. Where care leavers were reluctant to make contact, several HEI staff spoke in terms of multiple stages in the contact process over the pre and post arrival periods, giving care leavers several opportunities to come forward. This allowed care leavers more than one chance to access the support which could help them build up their levels of *capital* and enable them to make the most of the opportunities at university.

It was apparent from the interviews with HEI staff that considerable effort and staff time was involved in trying to engage with care leavers to inform them of the support options available. One way of reducing this may be through utilizing an existing relationship within care leavers' support networks: the relationship between a care leaver and their local authority. It is possible that this relationship has been historically difficult, but if local authority staff can be given the necessary information to start talking to care leavers about the support available from HEIs, and the benefits and implications of disclosing their care backgrounds, they will be better prepared to make decisions about support once at university. Even without having detailed information on the support package available at the care leaver's preferred HEI, local authorities could begin to reassure care leavers that disclosure does not mean being labelled, or being constantly singled out for preferential treatment by staff, and that by making contact with student support, they could at least see what would be available to them. This type of preparation for university to an extent reflects that received by students being supported by their birth families. It will

help make the *higher education field*, or environment feel more familiar. It will also positively influence the individual's *habitus*, making them more likely to make decisions and take actions that will benefit them. For example, it may help to foster increased feelings of entitlement to support, making care leavers more inclined to find out about the provision available and to access it from the outset. The relationship between care leaver and carer also provides a similar opportunity to prepare care leavers for higher education.

The role of named contact

Named contacts were one of the most common forms of support offered to care leavers by the HEIs participating in this study. In themselves, they provide a key source of *social capital* for care leavers. They also provide an easily identifiable route to accessing or building further *capital*. Nearly all of the student support staff interviewed stated that they provided known care leavers with a named contact, mainly from within student support, but in a small number of cases, a personal or faculty tutor from within the academic staff. The intention was that students used these staff members as a first point of contact to discuss any issues they had.

“Instead of passing them from pillar to post, to have one person so they didn’t have to disclose their status every time they contacted a different bit of the University for a different bit of support, and initially they could go through one person who they could just ring up and ask for by name.”
(S18, pre 1992 HEI)

The concept of a named contact was intended to give a human face to institutions, someone with whom care leavers could build a relationship of trust, so they did not feel apprehensive about asking for help or guidance.

“A named member of staff who is basically their problem solving person.”
(S16, pre 1992 HEI)

It also removed the practical difficulty of knowing who to turn to within an institution. Support staff hoped that students would seek help or guidance before small issues grew and started to affect their academic progress.

Chapter 6 will consider how much value care leavers placed on having named contacts.

Maintaining an appropriate level of ongoing contact and support with care leavers

Once initial links were established with care leavers, the approach to maintaining ongoing contact differed between HEIs. It was clear that staff had given a great deal of consideration to the extent of their roles in the lives of care leavers who lacked the support of their birth families. At a number of HEIs, staff described maintaining regular contact with care leavers, in some cases building up close supportive relationships.

“I contact each of my students on a regular basis. Maybe two weekly. Some of them want it monthly. Some of them don’t want it at all, but I do say to those, ‘Look, I know you don’t want it, but I’ll contact you once per term as a minimum if that’s ok, just to check that everything is going well with you. You can say to me ‘Fine, I don’t want to speak to you anymore.’ I’ll go with that.” (S5, post 1992 HEI)

This approach can be viewed as assuming one of the roles traditionally occupied by parents who contact their children throughout term time to check everything is going well. Although, as demonstrated above, some care leavers may not want this contact, other young people may feel it is a valuable source of support and *social capital*. Some staff described taking a more proactive approach to arranging support for care leavers than would be expected when supporting students generally.

“If I’ve got their permission to pass their details on, I might book someone an appointment with an adviser or go with them to the front

desk to make sure they've got an appointment in with finance, or do like a proper referral to mental health support. Anything like that. I don't tend to send them away with a leaflet unless that's appropriate and they just want to think about it, but if they definitely want to engage with the service I will set it up for them." (S1, post 1992 HEI)

The question of the appropriate level of support and contact to provide to care leavers appeared to present a conflict for student support staff. They wanted to provide a supportive relationship for care leavers to compensate for the lack of parental support available. However, they were also conscious of the need to promote independence with university being a time of emerging adulthood.

The majority of student support staff described informing care leavers about the range of provision available to them and the identity of the member of staff whom they could contact for support, and leaving students to decide what support, if any, they wished to access.

"If there's a problem they know where to come. If there's not, we don't hear from them. I think the important thing is that they know the support's there. We'd rather they didn't contact us. Then we know everything's alright." (S3, post 1992 HEI)

Some staff were conscious of over supporting students, highlighting university as a time of emerging adulthood.

"These are resourceful individuals who've come a long way to get to university. They read the letter and decide, yes I want to speak to [the staff member], no, I don't want to speak to [the staff member]. So do I really want to push it on them?and I feel there's an element of being patronising about that." (S3, post 1992 HEI)

This approach provided care leavers with the necessary information to access *capital*, but also placed the onus on them as adults to make their own decisions and seek out support.

“...as with any other student, it is independent learning and so forth. They have the capacity to find someone supportive, but if they don’t want it, it’s completely up to them.” (S16, pre 1992 HEI)

This implies that not hearing from care leavers is a sign that they are coping and do not require any help from staff.

The range of approaches currently being taken by HEIs raises the question of how pro-active student support staff should be in supporting care leavers, and how far it is appropriate for student support staff to adopt the supportive role usually assumed by parents. Student support staff also pointed to other students besides care leavers who did not have this safety net, such as those estranged from their parents. Existing research has shown that normative transitions to adulthood have become, “more protracted and the sequence of transitions less orderly and predictable” (Furstenberg 2010, p80). For example, young people move out of the family home, but many return for periods due to lack of finance, unemployment and relationship breakdown (Furstenberg 2010). The normative experience of higher education traditionally involves students continuing to benefit from the support of their parents throughout their studies and no expectation that students will become independent overnight. A study by Christie (2005), exploring the support received by third year undergraduates at two Scottish universities found that the majority continued to receive regular financial and practical assistance from their parents despite having been at university for a number of years. By comparison, care leavers are likely to have experienced compressed and accelerated transitions to adulthood (Stein 2006a). Several of the care leavers interviewed for this study described having lived independently or semi-independently from aged 16, or even younger in one case. This suggests that HEIs offering high levels of support to care leavers would not undermine their transition to adulthood. Instead, this approach could be viewed as helping to

slow down and extend the transition period, bringing it closer to a normative experience. In this way, it has a similar impact to initiatives such as Staying Put, discussed earlier in this chapter, which is aimed at promoting a gradual transition to adulthood by providing care leavers with the opportunity to remain living with carers until the age of 21 (Munro and colleagues 2011).

Whatever the degree of hands on support provided by HEIs, there was across the board recognition that care leavers were a heterogeneous group.

Depending on their circumstances, some care leavers wanted a high level of personal support and others wanted absolutely minimal contact and for nobody to know of their backgrounds. Student support staff saw their role as ensuring that care leavers knew support was available if required and how to access it. For those who wanted it, interviewees described trying to provide tailored support, with the process of tailoring led by the care leaver.

“At the moment it’s a question of getting the student in and then gauging from them what it is they want. So I am quite honest with them, you know. What is it that you’re looking for?” (S8, Russell Group HEI)

The level of support sought by the care leavers from staff in this study will be considered in Chapter 6. This will provide an indication of how far student support staff are being expected to become part of a care leaver’s support network, providing the *social capital* normally received from birth parents. Student support staff are well placed to provide support in the form of *social capital* as they are physically in the same location as care leavers. However, one interviewee reflected upon the relationship between care leaver and student support and its place within the student’s wider support network.

“Should they form those relationships through their friends? They know that I’m here if they want, but actually should contact from someone in student services in the university mean that much to them? To some, yes it does. To others, it doesn’t and I guess it’s just respecting that.” (S8, Russell group HEI)

HEIs are also only one of a number of organisations and individuals involved in providing care leavers with *economic, social and cultural capital* during this transitional stage of their lives. Chapter 4 will explore the support role being provided by local authorities and although beyond the scope of this study, carers also have a role to play in the support process.

Encouraging independence

Regardless of individual staff member's views on what constituted the appropriate level of support and contact to give to care leavers, there was general consensus that higher education was a period of emerging independence and adulthood. Student support staff described encouraging independence amongst care leavers as they would with any students.

"What we say to all students in welfare is this is the decision you've got. These are the implications of doing it this way. These are implications of doing it that way. Here's your advantages. Here's your disadvantages. You choose what's important to you." (S13, post 1992 HEI)

One staff member described being pragmatic with the care leavers he supported, saying,

"I think it's a kind of two way thing here. They do get quite a lot of financial support in a way and I see my role as saying, 'Well yes, this is what you're entitled to, but also with that right there is the responsibility for you to be that bit more independent and a bit more autonomous.' That's something that you need to be at university." (S4, post 1992 HEI)

Part of wanting to encourage independence also meant being conscious of not stifling care leavers through too much contact with staff.

"....does [contact] take away from that person's independence? Does it make that person feel.....I feel quite strongly about being autonomous. They are autonomous learners at university." (S3, post 1992 HEI)

The issue of higher education as a time for emerging adulthood and independence is particularly critical for care leavers as, when done successfully, it provides a transition period for young adults to practice living independently within what is really a fairly sheltered environment. It is an opportunity for care leavers to live in exactly the same way as their peers, learning how to live independently and making the same mistakes. However, proactive student support and promotion of independence should not be mutually exclusive. Student support staff are, after all, stepping in to provide some of the assistance and access to *capital* traditionally provided by parents. One key difference between the experiences of care leavers and other students is that even upon graduation, most students have their parents to 'bounce back' to before leaving home for good. Parents might provide their son or daughter with a place to live until they find employment and their own accommodation. They may provide financial support to their sons or daughters in this period, help them to get work experience, or to complete applications and prepare for interviews. By comparison, care leavers are expected to hit the ground running once they graduate. Although care leaver policy has developed in recent years to extend the length of time local authorities are required to support young people, including the obligation to support care leavers in higher education, there is no requirement to support students beyond graduation (Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, s.23). Unless care leavers are prepared for life post graduation, there is a risk that time spent at university or college will do no more than delay an abrupt transition into adulthood, whilst their contemporaries continue to test the waters from the safety of their parents' homes.

The period post graduation can be a very sensitive time for any young person as they move from the semi-sheltered environment of university to find employment and accommodation. According to government statistics, in 2009/2010, 61.9% of graduates were in employment six months after graduation, 7% were in employment and undertaking further study and 14.5% had gone on to further study. The proportion of graduates estimated to be unemployed was 8.8% (HESA 2011a). These figures show that graduates do

not necessarily leave university and walk straight into employment. There has been little research on the experiences of graduates leaving university. An Australian study by Perrone and Vickers (2003) found post graduation to be an uncomfortable period for graduates as they were faced with decisions about their careers and issues such as loneliness. Exit support from higher education had already been considered by one of the HEIs within the sample.

“I’ll be talking them through some of the decisions they need to make.
'Do you want to stay in [the area?] Do you want to go back to your local area?’ What are the duties of the leaving care team at that stage?
Making sure they’ve got the right financial information.... if they need housing benefit or to apply for local authority accommodation.” (S1, post 1992 HEI)

A number of the local authorities interviewed for this study also described considering how they could structure support during this period. Chapter 6 will explore how concerned care leavers were at the prospect of graduating. This is potentially an issue which needs further consideration by all agencies, so that the benefits of higher education are not wasted as care leavers encounter the challenges of finding employment and making a home upon graduation.

Confidentiality

Two elements of confidentiality were specifically referred to by student support staff in their interviews. In relation to the internal confidentiality of care leavers’ details held by an institution, student support staff were keen to stress that no information was passed between departments without the express consent of the care leaver concerned. For example, the named contact would not inform a personal tutor that someone came from a care background without their consent. In relation to the protection of confidentiality when interacting with outside agencies such as local authorities, student support staff emphasised how they were unable to discuss a care leaver without their express consent.

[If a parent calls about their son or daughter...] “I’m not even supposed to acknowledge their presence at university, unless the student has given me specific permission. So, if somebody, a contact person or someone from the leaving care teams phone up about a student, unless I have that name on that form I mentioned.” (S9, pre 1992 HEI)

It was felt that other professionals were sometimes unaware of the extent of a HEI’s duty of confidentiality to its students. Reassuring students of their absolute right to confidentiality was considered vital to encourage care leavers to come forward for support. It was also important that care leavers felt able to grant consent to information being shared with others which could be of benefit to them. For example, one HEI considered seeking consent to contact funding bodies such as the Student Loans Company, to expedite loans, which would potentially be of great benefit to students.

Ensuring care leavers understand the extent to which HEIs are required to protect a student’s confidentiality is the foundation to developing a trusting relationship between student and staff. Without trust, care leavers are unlikely to seek help and therefore miss out on building up their levels of *capital*. A care leaver’s *habitus* or disposition, may be based on the past experience of everyone knowing they come from a care background and the stigma attached to this. They will therefore have little expectation of this information remaining confidential at university, so may choose not to trust staff and reveal they are a care leaver. Confidentiality therefore represents a potentially key obstacle to care leavers improving their lives through higher education.

Financial support

In the internet questionnaire, 30 out of 50 (60%) student support staff stated that their HEIs provided financial support exclusively for care leavers, for example, in the form of a care leaver bursary. Some HEIs did not provide specific support, but treated care leavers as a priority group for other funding.

For example, this included the Access to Learning Fund, a government funded initiative used to assist students in financial need.

Fifty-seven percent of HEIs (17/30) providing care leaver bursaries or similar payments to care leavers did not means test those payments. At 23% of HEIs (7/30), payments to care leavers were means tested. Staff at seven percent of HEIs (2/30) did not know whether payments were means tested and 13% (4/30) gave no answer. The majority of HEIs, therefore, did not means test their payments, meaning that care leavers with generous financial packages from their local authorities would not be denied this support. Sixty percent (18/30) of HEIs providing care leaver bursaries or similar payments to care leavers reported that these sums were paid in addition to any other bursaries care leavers were eligible for. None of the HEIs paid a care leaver bursary or similar payment instead of other bursaries. One respondent did not know and the remaining 11 gave no answer.

The amount paid to care leavers varied across HEIs from one off payments of £500 to annual payments of £1500. The most common level of support described by student support staff was £1000 in each year of the course.

It was clear from the interview data that student support staff viewed financial support as an important element of their total support package, with care leavers at some institutions receiving several thousand pounds worth of additional funding over the course of their degree programs. However, one staff member expressed concern at the potential complexity of financial arrangements for care leavers and the need for care leavers to receive one to one support to negotiate the funding system.

“If you think of the role that feisty parents who are usually middle class have in making sure that their kids get the right funding in place and complain a lot to universities.... Who's taking that role on for care leavers?” (S2, post 1992 HEI)

Accommodation provision

It was noted earlier in the chapter, that the *Going to University from Care* study identified a risk of homelessness for care leavers caused by a lack of vacation accommodation (Jackson and colleagues 2005). Three hundred and sixty-five day accommodation subsequently became a key part of Buttle UK's 'Commitment to Care Leavers in Higher Education' (Buttle UK 2011b).

Accommodation was described by student support staff as being one of the most challenging elements of provision for care leavers, but despite this, 22 out of 50 HEIs (44%) responding to the internet questionnaire confirmed they offered 365 day provision. Staff saw difficulties arising because of pressure on limited accommodation places, especially in vacation periods when rooms were being used for conferencing and summer schools, and also because they were asking for something which had not been done before. Despite the challenges however, student support staff managed to work with accommodation services to agree provision. Some HEIs described providing care leavers with the option of remaining in halls of residence for the entirety of their degree programmes; others gave care leavers priority for places in halls.

As the basic concept of year round accommodation had become established, student support staff described looking at how to further refine their provision for those care leavers remaining on campus during holidays. As one staff member explained, a campus at Christmas "is the bleakest place in the world" (S13, post 1992 HEI). Possibilities being explored included establishing a programme of activities for students and providing care leavers with the resources to form their own social group, so they were not totally isolated. As an alternative to care leavers remaining on their own campus during holidays, it was suggested that HEIs could have reciprocal arrangements to accommodate each other's students over these periods. This would give care leavers the choice of moving to a university closer to family or friends.

The issue of vacation accommodation represents an area of support where it is difficult for student support staff to act as a substitute parent. The options staff are able to offer care leavers are limited compared to birth parents. Local authorities and carers, however, are better positioned to meet care leavers' needs in this regard. This supports the argument that some organisations and individuals are better placed than others to provide certain aspects of support to care leavers.

There was some concern amongst student support staff about care leavers remaining in local authority housing when they started university because they were afraid of losing their council tenancies, or were accustomed to living independently and did not feel a communal halls environment would suit them. Where this occurred, there was a fear that care leavers would not have the same opportunities to forge new friendships and take part in student life. Describing the conflict between moving into halls or remaining in local authority accommodation, one member of staff commented,

"I don't think there should be an assumption that if you've been in care or you come from a working class background, that you should hang on to the first council flat and stick to it like a limpet." (S13, post 1992 HEI)

From a *capital* perspective, these care leavers would retain the *cultural capital* of holding a council tenancy at the expense of gaining *social capital* in the form of new relationships at university. This trade off demonstrates the difficulties faced by those trying to deviate from the expected life course trajectory of those in their social group. To a care leaver who may have experienced frequent placement change and a lack of stability throughout their early lives, holding a tenancy means having their own home and security. The well publicised national shortage of affordable housing and the cap on housing benefit proposed by the coalition government as part of its austerity package will also increase pressure on care leavers to hold onto their tenancies (BBC 2011; Department for Work and Pensions 2011; Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2002). It therefore requires considerable bravery to give this up to pursue the long-term security a degree offers. This is particularly the

case when unemployment levels are increasing and the current economic climate means there is a lack of job security across many employment sectors (Office for National Statistics 2012). The life experience of an advantaged student growing up in their parent's home and brought up to expect success, means they do not have to make this decision to give up short-term security to improve their chance of securing long-term goals.

9 Buttle UK Quality Mark

The Buttle UK Quality Mark is awarded to HEIs demonstrating a commitment to supporting care leavers in higher education. As such, it could have a potentially significant impact on the support provision available to care leavers and therefore on their ability to build *economic, social and cultural capital*.

Internal impact

Interviews with student support staff show that the Buttle UK Quality Mark is viewed as having had a positive impact on the level of support provision available to care leavers in higher education.

In terms of the Quality Mark's impact within HEIs, student support staff have found that holding, or being in the process of applying for the award provided certain leverage in securing resources and funding from their institutions.

“It's been a very useful tool in adding weight and helping us to put things in place, which otherwise might have taken longer or been more difficult to do.” (S18, pre 1992 HEI)

Where elements of support were the responsibility of other departments within their institutions such as accommodation services, the Quality Mark provided the impetus to ensure their continued co-operation.

One of the greatest impacts of the Quality Mark was considered to be the focus and framework it provided for developing care leaver support.

"We are pulling together our statistics in an organised fashion. We're pulling together the work that we're doing into returns for them and the plan of commitment that they ask for in the first place has been a really good guide for us to work through." (S14, Russell Group HEI)

It was viewed as encouraging co-operation between HEIs by fostering the idea of a common cause.

Student support staff believed the Quality Mark had been of significant benefit in introducing support measures for care leavers. Without the leverage that it supplied in internal negotiations, much of the support that student support staff described establishing, such as care leaver bursaries or 365 day accommodation, may not have been achieved. As the majority of student support staff assumed responsibility for care leaver support on top of their existing workloads, it is questionable how much time they would have otherwise been able to commit to persuading senior management of the merits of targeting resources at such a small group within the student population. The same applies to the process of engaging other departments within HEIs to contribute to support provision. For example, in the case of 365 day accommodation, accommodation services needed to be persuaded to let rooms on extended contracts to care leavers as it meant reducing the accommodation available for conferencing guests.

External impact

Views on the Buttle UK Quality Mark's external impact were more mixed. On one level, staff saw it as signifying that their support was robust and had substance. However, its overall external impact was seen as being somewhat limited unless staff across other agencies recognised what it stood for.

"I don't know if people beyond groups similar to ours [AimHigher partnership] know what the [Buttle UK Quality Mark] is, or what it's about. They've probably not even heard of it." (S18, pre 1992 HEI)

This has significant implications as care leavers may not come across the Quality Mark unless they are told about it by someone such as their personal adviser or Connexions worker.

The mixed views on the Quality Mark's external impact are not entirely surprising as HEIs were at varying stages in developing their provision at the time of interview and student support staff reported their institutions advertised the award to varying extents. External recognition may also be something that will require time to develop gradually through word of mouth, as local authorities and other external agencies gain first hand experience of working with HEIs holding the award. The number of different quality awards now available such as Investors in People, or the BDA Dyslexia Friendly Quality Mark may also have resulted in a quality mark 'fatigue' where people attach less value to them as they become more numerous. This means HEIs will need to demonstrate the quality of their support and approach for other agencies to appreciate the value of holding the Quality Mark.

10 Conclusion

This chapter shows how student support staff have introduced a significant amount of support for care leavers in the relatively short period of time since the publication in 2005 of Jackson and colleagues' *Going to University from Care* study. Although the HEIs participating in the study were at differing stages in developing their support strategies, they were all in the process of introducing a range of support, which could help care leavers access and build up their levels of *social, cultural and economic capital*. The combination of outreach and on course support also provided a number of experiences which would positively influence the *habitus* of care leavers, as well as helping them become more familiar with the *field of higher education*. This in turn should have a positive impact on their decisions and actions whilst at university.

The overall approach to support involved using existing support mechanisms as far as possible, supplemented by elements of discrete provision. In terms of the discrete provision on offer, named contacts, 365 day accommodation and care leaver bursaries were most common. This provision reflected the findings of Jackson and colleagues (2005) and the recommendations of Buttle UK for institutions wishing to apply for its Quality Mark (Buttle UK 2011b).

The greatest differences between HEIs did not relate to the types of support available to care leavers, but to how proactive that support was and the frequency of contact between staff and students. Student support staff were conscious of providing care leavers with an appropriate level of support and of maintaining a suitable level of ongoing contact, whilst also encouraging independence. This raises questions about the role of student support staff in care leavers' support networks and to what extent they should or can fill the gaps left by birth parents. The interview data suggests that there are certain areas such as being a first point of contact for care leavers where student support staff are well positioned to substitute for birth parents. There are other areas such as vacation accommodation where staff can do relatively little. In such cases, it may be more appropriate and effective for other individuals or organisations such as local authorities, involved in supporting care leavers to take the lead. Chapter 4 will consider supporting care leavers from the local authority perspective and whether they are more suited to particular aspects of the support process.

Student support staff considered the Buttle UK Quality Mark to have helped significantly in raising the profile of care leavers in higher education. Staff also saw the award as providing a useful framework for HEIs looking to introduce support provision.

It is currently unclear how the changes being made to higher education funding will impact on future support for care leavers. Interviews suggest that the enthusiasm and commitment of individual student support staff has been key in establishing provision in a short amount of time. As a relatively new form of provision, care leaver support may be at risk of being restricted,

particularly as the numbers it affects are small. However, one would hope that the existence of the Buttle UK Quality Mark as public recognition of HEI commitment to care leavers, as well as the continued efforts of student support staff to establish provision will help protect resources available for care leaver support.

Chapter 4

The Local Authority Perspective of Care Leaver Support

1 Introduction

Chapter 3 explored the provision of care leaver support from the perspective of student support staff in universities. It concluded that support provision for care leavers in higher education has developed significantly since the seminal *Going to University from Care* study (Jackson and colleagues 2005) identified the deficits in support faced by undergraduates with care backgrounds. The chapter highlighted how although HEIs have introduced a wide range of support designed to help care leavers access and build their levels of *economic, social and cultural capital*, staff faced a number of issues which have implications for the provision of support in practice. These issues include difficulties in identifying care leavers for support and deciding what constitutes an appropriate level of support and ongoing contact throughout a care leaver's studies. The findings suggest that the individuals and organisations responsible for supporting care leavers through this period of their lives may have different strengths, which lend themselves to providing certain forms of support provision. The chapter also found that the Buttle UK Quality Mark was perceived by student support staff as having a positive impact on the development of care leaver support. The Quality Mark was seen as providing a useful framework for structuring provision and provided staff with internal leverage to more easily establish support within their institutions.

This chapter considers how local authorities are supporting care leavers in higher education to build up their levels of *economic, social and cultural capital*. As local authorities are a key provider of support to care leavers in higher education, this chapter will provide further context against which to

explore care leavers' experiences of going to university. The chapter examines the specific approaches to support currently being employed by a sample of local authorities in England and the issues shaping support in practice. These include the reasons why local authorities provide support and the level of support and contact that social care staff consider appropriate. Finally, the chapter considers how local authorities and HEIs currently work together to provide support for care leavers.

2 The Data

This chapter draws on data collected from staff in leaving care teams in local authorities across England. A member of staff was interviewed by telephone in twelve local authorities about their perspectives of supporting care leavers in higher education. Staff interviewed occupied various roles linked to leaving care and education, which are set out in Table 4.2.1 below. A full description of the sample and response rates is given in Chapter 2.

Table 4.2.1 The types of position held by the local authority staff interviewed

Type of position held	No. of interviewees
Head of Service/ Leaving Care Team Manager/ Senior Manager	7
Staff member with specific responsibilities for education	4
Benefits Adviser within Leaving Care Team	1

N= 12

The majority of interviewees were involved in the management of teams or services and were therefore able to provide an overview of their authority's leaving care provision. One third of those interviewed had a specific education

remit within their leaving care teams. Interviews were not requested with personal advisers or social workers involved in day to day support as due to the small sample size, it was considered more beneficial to obtain an overview of local authorities' approaches than focusing on individual staff members' experiences.

As data was collected from staff across a relatively small sample of local authorities, the views expressed by staff may not be representative of views nationally. However, the findings may be indicative of the issues and experiences faced by leaving care staff across the country.

The 12 local authorities in the sample reported having between 6 and 34 care leavers in higher education at the time of interview. This figure clearly depends in part upon the size and demographic of authorities and the needs of their care populations and cannot be taken to indicate the relative success of their care leaver support. All of the local authorities within the sample had seen their numbers of care leavers entering HE rise steadily within the previous five years, as is also reflected in the government's figures for care leavers in higher education, which indicate a rise from 1 to 6% of those leaving care (DoE 2011a).

3 The relevance of Bourdieu's theories of capital to the local authority role in supporting care leavers in higher education

Chapter 1 highlighted the normative role of parents in nurturing and supporting their children to ensure young people have all of the practical and emotional tools needed to make a successful transition into adulthood. In the context of Bourdieu, parents are expected to do their best to provide their children with *social, economic and cultural capital*, and to raise them in such a way that they are exposed to experiences which will positively impact upon their *habitus*. For example, reading to a child and trying to teach them the value of education will help develop levels of *cultural capital*. Encouragement throughout childhood to achieve and aspire will have a positive impact on that child's *habitus*, helping them to develop a sense of entitlement and a certain

expectation of success. According to Bourdieu, this combination of available *capital*, an individual's *habitus* and the particular *field* or environment in which the individual is located at a given time, will affect their choices and actions (Bourdieu 1984). This in turn influences how far an individual deviates from the life course trajectory expected of someone from their social class or group.

The specific level of support received by a young person from their parents will vary depending upon the levels of *economic, social and cultural capital* available to the family. One would therefore expect more affluent and advantaged parents to be more easily able to provide their children with the financial, practical and emotional tools to make the most of the opportunities offered by higher education. However, material disadvantage does not by any means automatically result in young people failing to gain and build *capital*. Parents without significant financial means will still be able to provide their children with emotional and practical tools, which will help them to build up their levels of *capital*. For example, teaching a young person to consider the long term implications of selecting a certain course or institution because of reputation or good employment prospects is a form of *cultural capital* which is not dependent upon wealth.

As a corporate parent, the role of the local authority is “to act as the best possible parent for each child [it looks] after and to advocate on his/her behalf to secure the best possible outcomes” (DCSF 2010a, p5). This mirrors the expectation of birth parents seeking to do the best for their children. Local authorities are under a specific statutory duty to promote the education of looked after children, which, according to the government’s statutory guidance means they, “should do at least what any good parent would do to promote their child’s educational aspirations and support their achievements” (Children Act 1989.s22(3A); DCSF 2010b, p17). There is, therefore, no lesser expectation on local authorities as corporate parents to care for young people than there is on birth parents. This reflects a historical change in the level of care which the state is expected to give to looked after children: from a time when the state was expected to provide the bare minimum of support such as

shelter and food until a child was old enough to work themselves, to a situation where the state is expected to emulate the role of a 'good' parent. Attempts by local authorities to support care leavers in completing undergraduate degrees reflects the wish of many parents to see their children going to university.

Despite today's local authorities being under an obligation to do what any 'good' parent would in respect of the young people in their care, there are obvious differences in the practical provision of that support. In the case of a local authority, multiple individuals will be involved in fulfilling the role of corporate parent. Foster carers or residential home staff are involved in day to day care, whilst social work staff are involved in case management, including completion of the Pathway Plan and overseeing care, together with other professionals such as designated teachers, virtual heads and independent reviewing officers.

However, overall, local authorities are expected to have the same aim as birth parents in giving young people the best chance of making a successful transition to adulthood. For local authorities, this too involves trying to provide young people with sufficient *economic, social and cultural capital*, and to expose young people to experiences which will positively influence their *habitus*. Bourdieu's theories are therefore equally relevant when considering the roles of local authority staff.

4 The definition of care leaver used by local authorities

The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 definition of a care leaver used by local authorities to establish eligibility for support was discussed in Chapter 1. Unlike HEIs, which have the ability to define their own criteria for supporting those with care backgrounds, local authority staff have a statutory framework to which they must adhere. The implication is that unlike HEI staff, who as discussed in Chapter 3, have considerable scope to provide support to students based on need even where they have only minimal care experience, local authority staff may be limited in the assistance they can offer to young

people not falling squarely within the statutory definition. The local authority staff interviewed did try to exercise some discretion where they felt it would be equitable to do so. For example, one local authority was able to provide support to young people who had aged out of the leaving care definition by a matter of months, but were about to embark on a higher education course. Another authority was able to pay the newly introduced £2,000 higher education bursary to students, even though they were at the point of graduation. However, it is possible that other local authorities not included within the present sample exercise less discretion when following the statutory guidance.

The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 sets out the minimum level of support that local authorities must provide to young people falling within its scope. As with HEIs, it is then a matter of internal policy and resources as to how far each leaving care team exceeds that minimum level of support. The ability to exercise discretion is important as it enables local authority staff to identify where young people could significantly benefit from assistance. For example, an authority may have a policy of paying travel expenses for a certain number of trips back to a student's home town each academic year, but agree to fund additional trips where they feel it would be beneficial to a care leaver, for example, due to the illness of a member of their birth family.

5 The structure of leaving care teams

The leaving care teams in those local authorities taking part in the study generally consisted of both social workers, and personal advisers. Within the majority of these teams, social workers supported the younger care leavers and those over eighteen were supported by personal advisers. Teams then either contained or worked closely with staff from other specialist areas, for example, healthcare staff, benefits advisers, Connexions and virtual school staff. Due to the size of local authorities, some leaving care teams were also divided into geographical areas with overarching management structures or core staff responsible for ensuring authority wide consistency of service.

The educational element of young peoples' care was also met using different staffing structures from authority to authority. None of the local authorities within the sample allotted all care leavers considering HE to a specific social worker or personal adviser within the leaving care team. Instead, the system required all social workers and personal advisers to navigate the higher education system with their care leavers. One local authority staff member explained why he saw this as the best approach,

“.....it means everybody has some experience of [advising care leavers in HE], it becomes a kind of norm for everybody, not a specialised thing to hive them off over there.” (LA5)

Because of the relatively small numbers of care leavers in higher education, in most of the authorities within the sample only a proportion of personal advisers and social workers had experience of supporting these young people. Routines and protocols were therefore still being developed, for example, on working with HEIs.

Some local authorities had a member of social care staff with a specific remit for aspiration raising or education. Their roles involved a mixture of co-ordinating services; ensuring consistency of support; advising and supporting other staff; making support decisions; and to a greater or lesser extent, hands on work supporting young people. In some authorities, education specialists such as teachers with virtual schools fulfilled this role, working alongside the social care teams, promoting educational outcomes, advising staff, co-ordinating aspiration raising events and sometimes becoming the key worker or adviser to individuals in education.

One of the key obstacles for local authorities in trying to emulate the role of supportive birth parents is the number of staff members and carers involved in corporate parenting. Whereas the normative experience involves young people being supported by one or two parents and possibly extended family members, corporate parenting involves multiple individuals. Potential disadvantages of this include support not being effectively co-ordinated and

the individuals responsible for providing support giving differing messages on the importance of higher education.

6 What shapes the support available from local authorities for care leavers in higher education?

The support provided to care leavers by local authorities is shaped by a number of factors, including statutory duty, the wider policy context within which local authorities operate, and the individual members of staff involved in providing care.

Local authorities' statutory duties

As already discussed, local authorities have a statutory duty to promote the education of those in their care (s52 Children Act 2004). Specific duties to provide a minimum level of support to care leavers entering higher education are contained in the legislation. Key responsibilities include; supporting care leavers under the age of twenty-five wishing to start a course of study (s23B, s23C, s24B Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000); appointing a personal adviser and preparing a pathway plan (s19, s23 C(LC) Act 2000C); funding accommodation in holiday periods (s24B C(LC) Act 2000); and paying a one off bursary payment of £2,000 (Part II s21 Children and Young Persons Act 2008).

Although the legislation is very specific about the support to be provided in some areas, such as a personal adviser and pathway plan, in other areas, the legislation leaves room for interpretation. For example, local authorities are required to provide assistance with living costs and course expenses “to the extent that [a care leaver’s] educational or training needs require it” (s23C(4) Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000). This means that the local authority has to assess and make a decision on what assistance is necessary for each young person. The advantage of this approach is that it enables local authorities to respond to the specific needs of young people, providing them with the forms of *capital* that will be most beneficial to them. It also means that no cap is

placed on the amount of support or *capital* an authority can provide, meaning that in one sense subject to budgetary constraints, the state is not restricting how far care leavers can deviate from their expected life course trajectory. The disadvantage for care leavers is that they are then reliant upon local authorities making realistic assessments of the costs of higher education and confirming the level of support care leavers should expect in good time. This will potentially influence a young person's decisions on whether to apply to university at all, and which institutions they would like to attend. Chapter 6 will discuss care leavers' experiences of receiving support and how well young people feel their local authorities have responded to their needs as they enter higher education.

The wider policy context

In addition to the obligations to support care leavers in higher education contained in legislation, the approach of local authorities will also be influenced by the wider policy context. There has been an ideological shift from a time when it was accepted that the state provided looked after children with minimal 'care' such as accommodation until they were old enough to start work and live independently (Jackson 1998). Today's underlying ideology is that all children from whatever background should have an equal opportunity to achieve, even though there may be some way to go before this becomes a reality. In terms of Bourdieu's theories on acquisition of *capital* and social mobility, this change in society's attitude towards children in the care of the state represents an opportunity to deviate from the pathway expected for the most disadvantaged in society (Bourdieu 1984).

The Every Child Matters and Care Matters initiatives emphasised the need to help every young person fulfil their individual potential (Department for Education and Skills 2004; 2007). These initiatives highlighted the need to consider education as an integral part of a young person's welfare rather than considering it in isolation. Current legislation and policy initiatives such as the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and the Staying Put programme also reflect attempts to address the compressed and accelerated transition from care to

adulthood experienced by many care leavers (Stein 2008; Munro and colleagues 2010). Such measures are intended to improve the planning and preparation young people receive for leaving care and allow them to remain with carers until they are ready to make the transition to independence. Taken together, these developments represent a philosophy of providing care leavers with a normative experience where they are given maximum opportunity and supported to achieve their full potential. Although in reality local authorities are subject to budget and staffing constraints, this philosophy is being seen in action where staff on leaving care teams described exceeding the minimum statutory obligation in their support of care leavers in higher education.

“I think [the authority] has always been very generous in the... in the support that it offers our students and I've never... I haven't come across a situation where the person's said they need even more support than we're giving.” (LA3)

A number of the local authority staff interviewed occupied relatively new positions within the leaving care structure. Their roles often provided a link between social care and education teams within local areas. This may be a reflection of how education is increasingly seen as a key factor in promoting the welfare of young people.

The role of local authority staff

The individual staff members involved in providing support to care leavers are responsible for ensuring that young people receive the level of day to day support which they require. Beyond this, the actions and decisions of individual staff can dictate how closely care leavers' experiences reflect normative experiences of going to university and how successfully they make the transition to adulthood. An ongoing positive relationship with social workers has been identified as an important factor in influencing whether a care leaver makes a successful transition from care (Mendes and Moslehuddin 2006; Duncalf 2010). The local authority staff interviewed

frequently compared the approaches they took to support care leavers with those taken in relation to their own children or grandchildren. One staff member recalled the instance of a foster carer of a nine year old child who had already looked into support in higher education.

“If it was my child, I would be thinking at nine. You would be looking towards what that child was interested in. You wouldn't broach going to university with a nine year old child, but you'd have it in mind for your own children. I think it's fair enough in this case as well.” (LA5)

This emotional rather than policy driven reaction of staff working in leaving care is hugely important and arguably lies at the core of successful corporate parenting; these staff stretch the system and resources as far as possible to try and emulate the support they provide for their own flesh and blood. In doing this, staff are providing care leavers to the best of their ability with *economic, social and cultural capital* in a similar way to birth parents. Within the current sample, this approach was not only being taken by frontline staff. Managers and those responsible for developing specific policies for authorities also described thinking in this way, leading to changes in the overall approach of leaving care teams. For example, one manager talked about the point at which young people became fully independent and compared the expectations placed on care leavers with his expectations as a parent saying,

“are we going to finish the job as a parent...and speaking as a parent, you don't just expect your children to be fit and ready to challenge the world at eighteen. There's enough stuff to work through whether it's at university or their first job....” (LA1)

Several of the staff members interviewed referred to building relationships with care leavers, having watched them develop into young adults and the feeling of pride this gave them.

“You see them from when they are sixteen and how they grow and get [to university], so it is a massive achievement and the staff do get a lot out of those who do actually achieve it.... and watching them go off and do that.” (LA10)

To an extent, emotional bonds such as these also replicate aspects of the parent and child relationship and the feeling of pride birth parents feel when their sons or daughters succeed. It is the reward for investing in care leavers and helping them to build their levels of *capital*.

However, existing research has found that many looked after children do not experience such positive relationships with social workers. Winter (2009) identified factors such as staff turnover, frequency of contact and cancellation of visits as damaging the relationships between young people and their social workers. Such experiences will have a negative impact on care leavers' *habitus*, and can ultimately lead to young people choosing not to continue contact with their local authorities once they leave care. One care leaver described how due to negative experiences and relationships with social workers, she had not wanted to continue any relationship with her local authority and how difficult she found it was when circumstances meant that she needed to contact them again. This illustrates one of the potential difficulties for local authorities in supporting care leavers: how to provide support to young people who do not want any ongoing contact. It also marks a key difference between the position of local authorities and HEIs as support providers. Because the relationship between HEI and care leaver is new, student support staff have the luxury of a 'clean slate'. Although a care leaver's *habitus*, formed through previous experience, may mean they have low expectations of being supported by any adults or authority figures, there is no actual history between HEI and care leaver. Leaving care teams have to provide support to care leavers who may associate them with any troubled relationships they have had with social workers in the past. This is an example of where HEIs may be better positioned to support a care leaver than their local authority and has implications for the importance of joint working

between local authorities and HEIs. This issue will be further considered later in this chapter.

The Buttle UK Quality Mark

Interviews with local authority staff revealed that the Quality Mark was viewed overall as being a positive development, helping to raise awareness of care leavers in higher education and offering reassurance to staff that they should be able to expect a certain standard of service from award holders. Local authority staff reported using the contact details for HEI student support staff contained on the Buttle UK website as a useful source of initial information and signposting. Since the interviews took place, the Buttle UK website has been updated to contain links to individual HEI websites. One social worker interviewed also described having referred specifically to a HEI's Quality Mark to help secure agreement during discussions with that HEI about support for a care leaver.

A number of the staff interviewed felt they had little awareness of the Quality Mark and its implications and consequently had not made care leavers aware of it when making decisions about courses and institutions. Whether or not local authority staff were fully aware of the Quality Mark and its implications, the priority for staff was advising care leavers to choose a course and HEI which suited them.

“It's about the course, the standing of the university. It's about their entry requirements and it's about whether they like it or not.” (LA7)

Staff suggested care leavers considered the existence of the Quality Mark in conjunction with these primary factors.

As with support from HEIs, the current level of local authority support for care leavers exists as the result of a combination of factors, and reflects a positive change in society's attitude towards the standard of care expected for looked after children and care leavers. Local authorities have a statutory duty to

provide certain core elements of support to care leavers, including the promotion of education. Wider policy initiatives such as Every Child Matters relating to young people generally and those relating to care leavers specifically such as Care Matters also impact on the approaches taken by local authorities (Department for Education and Skills 2004; 2007). On a day to day level, individual social work staff play a key role, with the ability to influence how closely care leavers' experiences of higher education reflect normative experience. Finally, the Buttle UK Quality Mark was viewed by local authority staff as playing a role in the support of care leavers in higher education. As the interviews were conducted in 2009 when the Quality Mark was relatively new, its current impact may have developed as it has become increasingly widespread. All of these factors have implications for the levels of *social, economic and cultural capital* possessed by care leavers when they enter higher education, and for their ability to further build on those levels of *capital* throughout their undergraduate courses.

7 Financial support (economic capital)

As discussed in previous chapters, the financial implications of entering higher education are significant, with students entering university in 2012 under the new regime of tuition fees expected on average to graduate with over £50,000 worth of debt (Push 2011). Despite the care leavers in this study paying tuition fees at a lower level than students starting their courses in 2012 (a maximum of £3,225 per annum for 2009/2010 compared to a maximum of £9,000 per annum for 2012), these care leavers were still likely to graduate with a considerable level of debt. In addition to paying tuition fees, care leavers also required *economic capital* to meet accommodation costs, household bills, food, course materials, and costs of non curricular and social activities. Having sufficient *economic capital* to cover living costs enables care leavers to participate fully in university life in a similar way to their peers and, as stated by one care leaver interviewed, allows them to focus on their studies instead of worrying about making ends meet. Possession of *economic capital* can therefore enable care leavers to build their levels of *social and cultural capital* by providing the means to participate fully in student life. Chapter 3

discussed the range of financial support available from HEIs to assist care leavers in meeting the costs of higher education. This chapter builds on those findings by considering the levels of *economic capital* provided to care leavers by local authorities as corporate parents.

One of the key findings of Jackson and colleagues' *Going to University from Care* study (2005) was the variation in the levels of financial support provided by local authorities to care leavers in higher education. Despite local authorities being required to comply with a number of statutory duties governing the support provided to care leavers in education, the discretion afforded to authorities to determine what constitutes an appropriate level of support meant that the approaches taken by local authorities could differ. The pressure on local authorities to stretch their resources to meet the needs of their local populations may mean having differing sums available to support care leavers in higher education. For example, one authority may be supporting a high number of unaccompanied asylum seeking young people, whilst another may be experiencing a shortage of foster carers. Both situations will require children's services departments to make decisions on prioritising budgets and where to focus resources. The funding available to support care leavers in higher education will therefore be affected by such localised issues.

The interviews with local authority staff revealed noticeable variation between the levels of financial support provided by authorities in the current sample. All of the authorities described paying in excess of the £2,000 bursary required under the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 (CYPA 2008). An example of one of the most generous packages involved a local authority paying tuition fees, accommodation costs and a weekly living allowance of up to £90 per week. Staff at two other local authorities estimated their packages were worth approximately £7,000 per annum. In some cases, authorities sought to ensure care leavers graduated debt free, which would not be the experience of the majority of graduates supported by their birth parents. One concern expressed by staff was that even where care leavers received generous financial packages, students could still be tempted to accrue debts because of

the easy availability of student loans. To avoid this, one authority required care leavers to take out student loans, which were then repaid or partially repaid at the end of the year. Feedback from young people at another authority supported this approach,

“When I've spoken to some of the young people they've said, 'I would have really liked that... the temptation to apply for the student loan.... you would have removed that really' and then they would leave debt free hopefully.” (LA6)

At the other end of the spectrum, one local authority in the sample required care leavers to take full student loans, but paid any shortfall to ensure the young people had adequate funds to live on. However, although this demonstrates a range of financial support available to care leavers, none of the local authorities in the sample appeared to provide less *economic capital* than would be expected from an average parent. The majority of undergraduates leave university having built up debts for tuition and maintenance fee loans and do not have parents wealthy enough to pay them off.

The £2000 bursary introduced under the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 for students from care backgrounds is a relatively recent development and at the time of the interviews, authorities were still developing their policies (CYPA 2008). Staff at six authorities were able to confirm the approach they had decided to take. In three authorities, the bursary was going to be paid as an additional payment, whilst in the other three, the payment would be incorporated into the existing package. Several of the staff interviewed thought the bursary was aimed at authorities which gave very little in the way of funding to care leavers and not at those authorities that were already comparatively generous. One authority with a particularly generous financial package used the £2000 to provide its care leavers with extra opportunities that they would otherwise have to fund themselves, including singing lessons and taking courses. The approach to paying the £2000 bursary further highlights how there is no consistent national approach on the level of

financial support provided to care leavers. However, the introduction of the bursary in itself reflects an attempt to bring some consistency to the minimum level of *economic capital* being provided to care leavers. It is beyond the scope of this study to calculate the level of financial support required by care leavers to meet their needs in higher education. However, it is important that those responsible for supporting care leavers consider the ongoing adequacy of their financial support, particularly in light of the changes to higher education funding currently taking place and the increase in tuition fees.

All of the authorities interviewed described paying contributions for travel, course books, materials and necessary items such as duvets and crockery. The specific sums involved again varied from authority to authority and were considered on a case by case basis. All authorities either funded or supplied a laptop. The majority of local authorities in the sample discouraged working part-time during term, although students were expected to find holiday work.

Chapter 6 will consider care leavers' experiences of financial support from their local authorities, providing further evidence of whether the variation in support found by Jackson and colleagues (2005) persists today. The chapter will also consider care leavers' experiences of part-time employment and the impact it may have on a student's academic work and their ability to build up *capital*.

8 Non financial support (social and cultural capital)

Although care leavers need to build their levels of *economic, social and cultural capital* to improve their positions in society, some local authority staff acknowledged that equal attention had not been given to all aspects of supporting care leavers in higher education.

“We think we've definitely nailed the financial element, but we have probably neglected the pastoral element.” (LA5)

Despite acknowledging the emphasis on finance, local authority staff still recognised the importance of non financial support.

“I think the [non financial support] does probably make the difference over and above the money. I think psychologically, emotionally, supported in the way that any good parent would be towards their [child].” (LA1)

The remainder of this chapter explores some of the key issues emerging from the interviews with local authority staff concerning their efforts to provide care leavers with the *social and cultural capital* needed to fully benefits from their time in higher education.

Aspiration raising

Existing research identifies a lack of expectation by social care staff, teachers and carers relating to the educational attainment of looked after children (Martin and Jackson 2002; Berridge 2006). This risks creating a vicious circle where low expectation means that young people are not being encouraged to succeed and aspire. The subsequent lack of success then reinforces the low expectation and lack of aspiration. Although policy initiatives such as Care Matters and AimHigher have highlighted the importance of educational attainment and aspiration amongst looked after children, the number of care leavers entering higher education suggests that there is still some way to go in closing the gap between looked after children and those living with their birth families (Department for Education and Skills 2007; Department for Education 2011a).

By comparison, Berridge (2006) describes how the aspirations of middle class parents are met through their use of economic, cultural and social strategies (*capital*), such as mixing with other high achievers and buying property in good school catchment areas. He describes a “confident expectation that things will go well” (p6). The high aspirations of parents will in turn be passed onto their children. Berridge (2006) argues that the state needs to match

some of the strategies used by middle class parents if looked after children are to succeed at school. Otherwise, looked after children and care leavers are unlikely to aspire to higher education and deviate from the life course trajectory historically expected of those from care backgrounds.

The interviews with local authority staff revealed a range of strategies being used to raise aspiration amongst looked after children and care leavers and encourage them to consider higher education. One local authority held an awards evening celebrating the achievements of its looked after children and care leavers.

“We highlight those who have gone to university to raise aspirations of those who might want to go to university.” (LA10)

Other aspiration raising measures included taster days at local universities, summer schools and mentoring programmes. Looked after children took part in events aimed at children from disadvantaged backgrounds generally and also events designed specifically for looked after children as a group. The interviews highlighted the importance for local authority staff of timely intervention, beginning the process of aspiration raising well before a care leaver applied for university.

“....we’re quite aware that failure occurs in years 9, 10 and 11. We want to make sure that we do all we can to stop it happening.” (LA4)

Several local authority staff described beginning to involve looked after children from around Year 9 in aspiration raising events to encourage them to think about their futures. By starting the process of aspiration raising early on, there is time for the experience to filter through into an individual's *habitus* and positively influence their future decisions about education. Being exposed to such experiences also provides looked after children with *cultural and social capital* which helps to compensate for the lack of *capital* from birth parents.

Such aspiration raising events were described as requiring significant input from local authority staff and often relied upon joint working between multiple agencies, such as schools and AimHigher partnerships.

“It takes an awful lot of planning for relatively small numbers in a sense. We probably have about ten or twelve at any one time [at summer school], but it actually works extremely well in terms of aspiration raising.” (LA6)

One local authority staff member described the work involved in jointly running a summer scheme.

“The looked after team had to provide social workers to attend in terms of risk management, but also so our young people would feel confident and comfortable. The logistics of organising the transport to get them there on time, to get them back... always fairly nightmarish and obviously the steering group meetings.” (LA5)

Aspiration raising was also being undertaken with care leavers and older individuals, whether or not it was expressly described as such by the staff members interviewed. In respect of the current sample, it mainly took the form of visits to university campuses and open days, although a number of other innovative approaches were described. One local authority staff member took young people to the theatre, galleries and cultural events to widen their experiences. He also invited care leavers who were already in higher education to go on the trips so young people could talk to someone from a care background who had achieved something they may not have thought possible. He explained how this strategy reached care leavers in a different way to a staff member talking to them.

“I can tell someone about [university], but I’m ancient aren’t I? That doesn’t have any meaning at all. But when [former care leavers] talk to them about it, it does allay a lot of their fears.” (LA5)

By doing this, the local authority is providing a culturally enriching opportunity to its care leavers, who also benefit in terms of *social capital* by meeting a care leaver with experience of higher education. This reflects the sort of experience a birth parent might try to give their own child to broaden their horizons and raise aspirations.

The Pathway Plan and its reviews were seen as being crucial to the process of discussing young peoples' aspirations and starting to act upon them. But as one local authority staff member explained, the review process was not fail safe in itself,

“The review is critical in my view and I think that’s probably been a weakness in many authorities. Though they might do the statutory review itself, tick the boxes, they need to be a bit more meaningful....”
(LA1)

A key issue for local authority staff trying to raise aspirations was the lack of confidence and self-belief amongst care leavers. One local authority staff member described the positive impact taking care leavers to visit HEIs could have by recalling one young person’s reaction,

“....she gave me a big smile and said ‘I could do this.’ I said ‘Well I never doubted that. That wasn’t the question.’ That’s the overwhelming response, the realisation, actually I can do this, these people are just like me.” (LA5)

Although lack of confidence was viewed by local authority staff as an obstacle to aspiration raising, it was less of an issue in the eyes of the HEI staff interviewed. This is possibly because local authority staff have got to know care leavers very well over an extended period of time, whereas HEI support staff do not have this historical relationship.

The influence of carers, whether foster carers or residential care staff, was viewed as having a significant impact on aspiration levels.

“It's critical that they are included because otherwise we won't get people to go off to university, or only those who are incredibly resilient will go off to university.” (LA11)

Carer involvement was also seen as an area for future development.

“Often it's lack of experience and lack of appreciation by foster parents, even stable foster homes which are rarer than they ought to be... stable placements I should say, that hold young people back. I'm not wishing to be critical of foster parents, but sometimes they don't come from backgrounds themselves where HE has been on the agenda. It hasn't been inter-generational as it has been in some families and they feel ill-equipped to know what it is that will get young people to university and they don't always know how to work with schools, when schools are very conscious about career planning for people who might aspire to university. We want to raise that and maybe even in some instances raise the aspiration of foster parents for themselves, because many of them have not been progressing in education and could have done and could still.” (LA4)

Local authority staff described their foster carer and residential staff training including modules on education. Consideration of long term educational goals such as further and higher education was also being incorporated within this by many of the local authorities in the sample.

Disclosure

Chapter 3 described the wide range of *universal*, *enhanced* and *discrete* support available to care leavers from HEIs, but also highlighted how staff only become aware of those students eligible for support if they choose to disclose their backgrounds, either through the UCAS application form tick box or directly to staff. One local authority staff member described the dilemma faced by care leavers deciding whether or not to disclose.

“What they're worried about is not being able to make a fresh start. They probably come from a school where as far as they're concerned, too many people know that they're in care and they want to go to [university] and have nobody know... and yet they also want to know that there is someone at university they can go to when they need to.” (LA4)

Local authority staff suggested that care leavers were not averse to an individual such as a student support adviser within their HEI being made aware of their background. This is an area of the support process where local authority staff are well positioned as corporate parents to prepare looked after children for higher education. Part of this preparation should involve explaining the benefits and implications of ticking the disclosure box on the UCAS application form so that the support process within HEIs is triggered. Ensuring young people understand the disclosure process provides the key to accessing support at university, which will in turn help them increase their *economic, social and cultural capital*.

Raising awareness of support

Local authority staff viewed an important element of their role in preparing care leavers for higher education as equipping young people with information about the support that would be available to them. One local authority staff member highlighted a crucial distinction between support opportunities being available to care leavers and care leavers being made aware of those opportunities.

“.....what we'd like to see is everybody who has care experience to be given the opportunity to move on to HE. I think it's just a general aspiration really and that already exists within [the authority.] So yes, I think it's just ensuring that everybody gets that, has that opportunity and knows they've got that opportunity.” (LA3) (emphasis added)

A local authority or HEI could have the most extensive and innovative support available to care leavers, but unless that information is communicated to all care leavers, it is an opportunity wasted.

One staff member interviewed admitted that because of their workload, not every staff member on 16+ and leaving care teams would be aware of the opportunities in higher education. As a result, that authority was taking steps to raise the profile of higher education and what it means for a young person. Starting the information process early was also seen as being beneficial, with some authorities expecting staff to start talking to young people about what they aspired to do and the possibility of higher education in their early teens. These sorts of conversations mirrored those which staff are likely to be having with their own children at that age. Local authority staff interviewed also saw the responsibility for talking to young people about higher education spread between a number of people. For example, the case worker, carer and reviewing officer were all seen as having a role to play in letting care leavers know they would be supported through higher education long before the leaving care team start to give specific information closer to the point of application.

In terms of giving specific advice on the extent of support a care leaver could expect, social workers and personal advisers generally described taking the lead in the advising process, sometimes giving advice in conjunction with other professionals such as finance or benefits advisers. The timing of this advice varied, however, from authority to authority within the sample. Pathway Planning meetings provided an opportunity to discuss the support available to care leavers considering higher education, but local authorities described tailoring the provision of information to suit individual young people.

“It depends who it is really. I've got one young woman... she's really vague and couldn't decide which subjects to do, so I [gave her information] when she was still at school.” (LA5)

The importance of making care leavers aware that support was available if they wanted to go into higher education was expressed by various authorities.

“.....the thing in the planning process is sit down and make sure that the young person gets the message that if they wish to go to university and are successful in getting a place, then financially they will be supported. They will be required to complete their own parts of the financial process, but as long as they do that essentially they don't need to worry. They will get a good package of support.” (LA8)

A simple, yet useful mechanism employed by several authorities in the sample was the provision of written information as an aide memoir to take away from the face to face conversation with staff. One local authority had a form which staff worked through to assess a young person's support requirements if they were considering higher education. For example, it covered areas such as travel, course texts and accommodation costs.

“On occasion you get the young person ringing up saying, 'What happens about my books?' Sometimes they've forgotten what they've been told, but the best thing to do it to give them a copy of the form, which acts as a checklist for everybody, and can be their checklist.” (LA4)

This has the dual advantage of ensuring that the young person and staff member consider all of the support requirements involved in higher education and enables managers to ensure consistency of support across the service and therefore fairness. As an alternative to written information, another authority used a film made by a care leaver, which was intended to act as 'a visual leaflet'.

Communication between local authorities and care leavers was key to the approach described by many of the local authority staff interviewed with an emphasis on ensuring that care leavers were made aware of support well ahead of the UCAS application process beginning.

The fact that the *habitus* of care leavers, formed from previous life experiences, may result in them lacking the sense of entitlement felt by young people from more privileged backgrounds whose parents have instilled a certain level of expectation in them, means that care leavers are less likely than their peers to make assumptions about the availability of support or their right to it. Making care leavers aware of support and their eligibility is therefore an area where local authority staff are well positioned to play a key role. Ensuring care leavers are given appropriate and timely information about support in higher education also ties in with local authorities' wider obligations under leaving care legislation and guidance to include care leavers in the planning process and inform them of the support available (Department of Health 2001).

Chapter 6 will consider care leavers' perspectives of being made aware of support and whether their experiences reflect the approaches described by local authorities in the current sample.

Tailoring support

The concept of tailored support runs constantly through local authorities' descriptions of their support activities. Many of the local authority staff interviewed described their roles as encouraging and pushing care leavers to believe in themselves whilst being sensitive to their individual wishes. For example, staff who took care leavers on one to one campus visits to encourage them to consider higher education recognised that some young people may not want to be seen with their social worker, whilst others would be unconcerned.

“Some young people would not be seen dead in a social worker's car anywhere near university [.....] and some young people say, ‘Get the car out!’. It just depends on the individual.” (LA4)

Tailoring support to meet the needs of individual care leavers is important as it reflects how in a normative situation parents are likely to support their own children differently depending upon each child's personality and needs. Effective tailoring of support to respond to individual need also increases the likelihood of local authority staff having a positive impact on care leavers' *habitus* which will influence their future decisions and actions and, therefore, their ability to build up their levels of *capital*.

Care leavers may take longer than their peers to reach a point academically and personally where they are ready to go to university, either because of disrupted schooling, or because they are dealing with other issues arising from their childhoods such as a parent's or their own mental health issues, or involvement in crime (McAuley and Davis 2009). One member of staff described allowing a young person the time to decide whether higher education was right for them.

“[The young person] said, 'I've decided I want to get a job instead, I don't want to go to university'. I said to her 'That's fine', but I said, 'I'll tell you now, there's nothing like a couple of years at work to make you appreciate how nice it is to be a student. So if that point arrives, you know where to find me.' Two years later she's actually at university.” (LA5)

Some of the local authorities interviewed identified the need for flexibility and were looking at how best to fully use their statutory obligation to provide a period of extended support for care leavers beginning higher education courses up to the age of 25. Care leavers could then return to enter higher education without losing out on the support of their local authority. In light of the current high levels of youth unemployment, having an extended opportunity to continue with or return to education may prevent some care leavers from entering long term unemployment (ONS 2011). In doing so, this is another way that local authorities are helping care leavers deviate from one of the common outcomes for disadvantaged young people by helping them increase their *cultural capital* in the form of education.

Maintaining ongoing contact

In a normative situation, parents would expect to have some continuing contact with their son or daughter once they entered higher education. Although parents and birth families eventually cease to play such a prominent role in a young person's support network as that young person establishes a network consisting of new university friends and staff, most birth parents continue to provide an emotional and financial safety net for their children, providing *economic, cultural and social capital*.

Maintaining ongoing contact was one example of how local authorities tailored their support for care leavers, depending upon individual need. Providing staff had a minimum level of contact with care leavers, for example, once a term to ensure there were no problems, they were generally willing to let students dictate the frequency of contact. The role described by some local authority staff resembled that of parents, showing an interest in young peoples' lives whilst negotiating an appropriate level of ongoing contact. One authority had introduced a successful policy of personal advisers visiting care leavers at university to understand their environment.

“They like to show you in their room and it's an extremely important and exciting time for them. We absolutely should be there doing that with them, sharing in that, and I think one of the testaments to our relationship with our young people and particularly those in HE, is that we are.... I don't think there has been a graduation or one coming up that we haven't been invited to.” (LA8)

Ongoing contact was seen by staff as being necessary because of a tendency amongst some care leavers to ignore growing problems and not ask for help until matters became critical.

“They stick their heads in the sand. That's a very common theme really, and sometimes it's gone too far, you know, to be able to help. We've

had quite a few extreme cases of young people who have done just that.” (LA11)

Silence was generally not seen as a sign that all was necessarily well with a young person, although staff also recognised that it could be an indication that someone had settled well into university life.

Where the relationship between a local authority and care leaver had been historically difficult, maintaining ongoing contact could be problematic for local authorities as higher education provided an opportunity for care leavers to sever contact. Where this occurred, the three way relationship between care leaver, local authority and HEI was seen as providing a potential solution.

“If you've got the university people involved somehow in the process, you've got an agent at the university if you like, pro the young person.” (LA4)

This member of staff had successfully managed to develop one such three way relationship.

“[The university] were incredibly proactive in forging new academic plans for the young person, telling us what they were, making sure the young person knew we knew that we were both monitoring it and what modules were being re-sat and why, what marks had been achieved..... quite incredible. All with a view to maintaining that person at university.” (LA4)

This model of working could provide a means of local authorities meeting their ongoing obligations towards the care leaver, whilst also allowing the care leaver to feel they are moving on with their lives and becoming more independent. However, as discussed in Chapter 3, HEI staff placed great emphasis on encouraging autonomy and independence amongst students. This involved letting students know who they could contact if they needed advice or assistance, and leaving them to make their own choices about

accessing support. HEI staff suggested that local authorities did not always appreciate that they were unable to confirm even whether a student was registered with their institution, much less give out a progress report on an individual. It is not clear from the data how successful involving HEIs in maintaining contact with care leavers has been to date overall. It relies upon HEIs being willing to play this role, which even if they agreed to in principle, may be problematic in terms of staff time. Chapter 3 revealed how supporting care leavers formed only a small percentage of the role of most student support staff in HEIs and current changes in higher education funding may also have an impact on staffing levels. This may therefore represent an aspect of care leaver support that HEIs are better placed than local authorities to provide, but one which is at odds with the HEI ethos of promoting independence and autonomy amongst students.

Local authorities seeking to monitor the welfare of care leavers in higher education in accordance with their duty to maintain Pathway Plans under the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 are therefore faced with a potentially difficult task. Although local authority staff described examples of successfully maintaining ongoing relationships, once in higher education, care leavers are living in an environment where autonomy is promoted and confidentiality protected. If a care leaver does not want to maintain contact with their personal adviser, there is little the local authority can do about it.

Vacation accommodation

Since publication of the *Going to University from Care* study (Jackson and colleagues 2005) highlighting the risk of homelessness amongst care leavers in vacation periods, the current study shows how for the HEIs in the sample, 365 day accommodation has become a core element of the support package. This enables care leavers to remain in halls of residence throughout the holiday periods. At the same time, an obligation has been placed on local authorities through the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 to fund accommodation for care leavers during holiday times with the aim of leaving no care leaver at risk of becoming homeless during the holidays.

As this is not a longitudinal study, it is not possible to explore how local authority accommodation policies have developed since accommodation was raised as an issue by Jackson and colleagues (2005). However, local authorities in the sample described a range of options currently available to their care leavers as an alternative to remaining on campus during holiday periods. The range of options offered by the local authorities interviewed included choosing to remain in halls or shared houses at university, staying with family members, friends, or being found a place in supported lodgings.

“We give them [a sum of money] so that they can put that towards the rent where they are, the rent back here, if they want to go back to previous carers or family or friends they can negotiate what the contribution is.” (LA7)

A further option, which many of the local authority staff interviewed were enthusiastic about, was returning to stay with old foster families under the Staying Put initiative, which enables over 18s to remain in foster care (Munro and colleagues 2010). The option of continuing relationships with foster families was widely regarded by those local authority staff interviewed as contributing to young peoples’ stability and happiness in higher education and therefore their *capital*. Local authorities have found that young people who have been in foster care valued the chance to remain in contact with those families.

“...they’ve basically become a family member. They’ve got that continued support through university.” (LA3)

Staying Put was being used by several authorities as a means of offering this option, by enabling payment to foster families specifically for this purpose (Munro and colleagues). In some authorities, care leavers were also being offered the possibility of accommodation with foster families, even if they had not previously lived with them.

Options such as returning to live with foster carers in the holiday periods provide care leavers with a further source of support and therefore *economic and social capital* during their time in higher education. This provides a safety net and relationship similar to the normative relationship between parent and young person returning from university.

“That was his family. He saw them as his family and [staying with them in vacation periods] was a chance for them to catch up and see how well he'd done as well.” (LA10)

Care leavers will pack up their belongings at the end of term in the same way as other students, they will take home their dirty laundry and return to university at the same time as other students for the start of the new term.

These options suggest that local authorities have taken the conclusions of the *Going to University from Care* study on board and are trying to present solutions which meet the needs of their care leavers (Jackson and colleagues 2005). The common link between local authorities' responses was that they all described being led by the care leaver according to their individual circumstances and preferences.

Chapter 3 highlighted the importance of supportive relationships and networks in delivering support to care leavers. Unlike with financial support, which can be delivered with little contact between provider and recipient, the provision of effective non financial support often requires there to be a relationship between the two parties. Supporting someone through emotional difficulties, for example, is unlikely to be possible without some face to face contact or a relationship of trust. Supporting care leavers by raising their aspirations, helping them to understand the implications of disclosing a care background and maintaining ongoing contact are all very much dependent upon a relationship existing between the local authority and individual care leaver. This chapter has already identified two potential barriers for local authorities in supporting care leavers: reluctance of care leavers to maintain contact with their local authority because there has been a historically difficult relationship;

and the high number of individuals involved in corporate parenting compared with the traditional family unit. The need for a relationship to effectively provide non financial support may also help explain why some local authorities described focusing more on the provision of financial support. Chapter 3 suggested that individuals and organisations involved in supporting care leavers each have different strengths making them more suitable to deliver certain types of support than others. Where relationships between care leavers and social care staff have broken down or have become difficult to maintain, HEI staff may therefore have a role in helping to provide non financial support once a care leaver reaches higher education. Even where positive relationships exist between care leavers and their local authorities, there are practical difficulties in providing ongoing non financial support where a care leaver has moved some distance to university or college.

In terms of Bourdieu's theoretical framework, any difficulties experienced by local authorities in providing non financial support to care leavers potentially limits the amount of *social and cultural capital* they are able to access. It is therefore in the best interests of care leavers for support providers to work together to ensure they have that access.

Mutual understanding and co-operation with HEIs

The local authority staff interviewed felt there could be increased understanding between themselves and HEIs, although there was a general perception that this situation was improving.

“Universities find local authorities bureaucracy baffling. They assume that if they talk to ... I don't know..... Ealing Social Services that Lancashire Social Services are going to be the same, same structure, same processes, same job titles. They assume a homogeneity that doesn't exist. [.....] Social care doesn't understand universities and doesn't understand that each one of them is individual.” (LA4)

Local authority staff acknowledged that they did not fully understand the structure of support within higher education. One local authority staff member described his initial confusion at the system of care leaver bursaries paid by HEIs.

“We were a bit confused about that, and we've done a lot of research and realised that bursaries are given very much at the discretion of universities.” (LA1)

Another member of staff suggested that HEIs would benefit from having a greater understanding of the implications of coming from a care background.

“I think it's what kind of situations and issues can affect care leavers who've had care experiences, and so I think it's just getting an experience of that and how that can have an affect on... on the kind of life overall. So you know, for example, someone who's maybe undertaken therapeutic work, something of that nature, and how that might affect them in their day to day living.” (LA3)

Staff did not always feel confident that HEIs fully appreciated the duties of social care staff towards care leavers, for example, the duty to maintain contact and review every young person's Pathway Plan.

Although a failure to co-operate and understand one another makes the jobs of HEI and local authority staff more difficult, it is care leavers who stand to lose the most. For example, confusion amongst local authority staff about the financial support available in higher education could result in care leavers failing to access valuable *economic capital* in the form of bursaries.

Where local authorities and HEIs communicated successfully, it was possible to overcome gaps in mutual understanding to the benefit of the care leaver.

“We had one young person, []she was going through a particularly torrid time at a certain period in the year and it was related

to her in care experiences and I just don't think [the HEI] had the ... you know, they'd not had the experience to deal with such situations. You know the conversations between us helped that and maintained her at university." (LA3)

The named contact for care leavers, a position held by a member of student support staff in HEIs, was viewed positively by local authorities. In many ways it is similar in concept to designated teachers and virtual heads in schools: an identifiable figure within an organisation responsible for care leavers and crucially, with sufficient authority to make things happen.

Local authorities in the sample made a clear case for the benefits of jointly working with HEI staff, particularly those in student support. One of the difficulties for local authorities that has already been touched upon is that of maintaining ongoing contact with a care leaver who could physically be situated at the other side of the country. If a care leaver fails to respond to telephone calls and emails, leaving care teams are limited as to what they can achieve without the co-operation of HEIs. One solution that has already been discussed is the possibility of HEI staff acting with the permission of the care leaver as a contact point for the local authority. Yet students forgetting to contact their parents is an age old problem and student support could not be expected to act as a contact point for everyone. According to Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld (2005), part of settling into university life and becoming more independent involves students relying more upon friends and staff forming their university support networks during term time and less upon their home networks. However, one point made by local authority staff was that care leavers may be dealing with issues from their childhoods, for example experiencing mental health problems or unwelcome contact from birth families. The implications for the care leaver if these types of issue were not picked up are far more serious than the issues faced by most undergraduates.

A further issue which needs addressing if co-operation is to work smoothly is that of confidentiality. As already explained, the interviews with HEI staff highlighted how carefully they guarded students' privacy. If local authority staff

are to be able to ask HEIs to check on the welfare of their care leavers, it would be entirely dependent upon the care leaver first disclosing their status and giving their express consent to the release of information to their social worker or personal adviser at the start of the year. In practice, this is still likely to be dependent upon HEIs and local authorities forging close links, so HEI staff are reassured that local authorities are only checking up on students where there is real concern and not being overprotective. As one leaving care manager commented,

“Student support [in HEIs], once you’ve got a hot line to somebody and when they know they’ve got someone at the other end who is going to be sensible and will help them, I think they’re excellent.” (LA4)

Both the local authority staff and HEI staff interviewed identified clear benefits to co-operation and working in partnership: less time spent trying to identify contacts in other organisations; less need to repeat information every time contact is made; knowing what information to share; mutual awareness of the entire support package; quicker resolution of care leavers’ issues; and clear lines of communication for staff and for care leavers. Effective co-operation has the potential to transform support services from individual components into a process where all the parts link together smoothly. Such a process would make it less likely that individual care leavers could slip between the cracks and miss out on support or *capital*. Co-operation between organisations should also reduce the possibility of overlooking care leavers experiencing difficulties in higher education.

The interviews with local authority staff in the sample also revealed a regional slant to some of the work between HEIs and local authorities.

“I think [co-operation] locally works very, very well because we’ve got various people from [local universities] on the steering group, so we’ve got named contact points if there are any issues about our young people or care leavers generally. Where it gets more complicated is

where you've got our care leavers who have disappeared to far flung corners of the country.” (LA6)

Work to develop coordinated support for care leavers such as establishing multi-agency groups and networks to share best practice and undertake benchmarking were described as occurring in regional clusters. The reason given for this was simply the logistics involved in working nationally and also because various relationships already existed at a local level which could be used as a basis for new working relationships. A number of local authorities and HEIs referred to having jointly organised aspiration raising events using funding from the AimHigher programme, which brought staff in both organisations into contact.

9 Conclusion

It is clear from this and the preceding chapter that there is a substantial range of support provision potentially available to care leavers entering higher education in England, including financial, practical and emotional support. In Bourdieu's terms, this range of support provides care leavers with the means in the form of *economic, social and cultural capital* to improve their position within society. However, it is clear from the interviews with local authority staff that there are a number of issues which impact on a local authority's ability to provide the *capital* needed by care leavers to make the most of the opportunities in higher education.

In terms of *economic capital*, local authorities have a statutory responsibility to provide support for care leavers, whether or not they choose to continue in education. This means that authorities have to make decisions on how best to use limited budgets and resources to support care leavers with very varied needs. As a result, where legislation provides authorities with the discretion to determine what constitutes the appropriate level of support in a given situation, there is likely to be variation between authorities in the levels set. Jackson and colleagues (2005) highlighted variation in levels of financial

support across the country in the *Going to University from Care* study and the data collected in this study suggests that variations in support continue.

In relation to the provision of *capital* generally, the previous chapters highlighted the importance of developing relationships in order to provide support to care leavers, and the interviews with local authority staff suggest that this is a particularly important issue for them. Building a relationship with a care leaver also enables support providers to better understand an individual's needs and tailor support accordingly.

In many ways, local authorities should be well placed to provide support to care leavers as their staff will have had ongoing relationships with young people for an extended period of time. However, where care leavers have had troubled relationships with social workers in the past, this may damage their ongoing relationship with staff from the leaving care team. This presents a barrier to staff seeking to provide care leavers with the support and encouragement other young people would receive from their birth parents as they enter higher education. The physical distance between local authority staff and care leavers where young people have moved out of area to go to university also creates difficulties for local authority staff trying to maintain supportive relationships with care leavers.

In order to overcome the barriers caused by the difficulty of maintaining relationships with care leavers in higher education, the local authorities in the sample have very much looked towards joint working with HEI staff who have the advantage of being in close proximity to care leavers and of not having any relationship history with care leavers. Although staff felt that further steps could be taken to increase the mutual understanding of HEIs and local authorities and improve joint working, there have been successes. Building on these positive experiences could offer a mutually beneficial arrangement between HEIs and local authorities to improve the support provided to care leavers across the country.

Chapter 5

The experiences of students from disadvantaged backgrounds

1 Introduction

Chapters 3 and 4 discussed the support available to care leavers in higher education from their HEIs and local authorities. The chapters considered the factors shaping support, for example, the statutory and policy backgrounds, the role of individual staff and the influence of the Buttle UK Quality Mark. They explored the range of support available from a sample of HEIs and local authorities and the issues that affected the provision of support in practice. The chapters suggested that since publication of the *Going to University from Care* study (Jackson and colleagues 2005), there have been significant developments in the provision of support for care leavers in higher education. However, there remained some areas where HEI and local authority staff faced obstacles to providing support in practice, for example, HEI's reliance on care leavers disclosing their care backgrounds and a mutual lack of understanding between HEIs and local authorities. The provision of support for care leavers in higher education is therefore continuing to develop. The overview of support established by Chapters 3 and 4 provides a context for understanding the experiences of care leavers in higher education.

Using Bourdieu's theories as a framework, this chapter explores the experiences of seventeen students in higher education who come from disadvantaged backgrounds, but have no experience of local authority care. This provides a comparison group of other students from non traditional

backgrounds who are likely to have deficits in *social, economic or cultural capital* and, therefore, benefit from support provision. Exploring the perspectives of students within this group will help to understand if, and how the experiences of care leavers differ from their peers in higher education. The experiences of care leavers will be considered in Chapter 6.

2 The data

Seventeen students from disadvantaged backgrounds were interviewed in total in the course of this study. Fourteen (14/17: 82%) described themselves as being first generation students and eleven (11/17: 65%) were in receipt of full maintenance grants. Eight (8/17: 47%) students described themselves as being both first generation and in receipt of the full maintenance grant. Four were male, 13 female with ages ranging from 18 to 55 years. None of the students had experience of care. The sample is not necessarily representative of all students from these disadvantaged backgrounds, but may raise issues which are relevant to a wider population.

Table 5.2.1 shows the types of HEI attended by those interviewed. Twenty-four percent of students (4/17) attended Russell Group HEIs. A further 29% (5/17) came from pre 1992 HEIs and 47% (8/17) came from pre 1992 HEIs. None of the students attended HE colleges.

Table 5.2.1

Number of interview participants by type of HEI

Type of HEI	No. of interview participants
Russell Group HEI	4 (24%)
Pre 1992 HEI	5 (29%)
Post 1992 HEI	8 (47%)
HE College	0 (0%)

N=17

Table 5.2.2 shows the range of subjects studied by the disadvantaged students interviewed.

Table 5.2.2

Interview participant by type of subject studied

Subject area	No. of interview participants
Social Sciences	4
Medicine/Vetinary science	3
Education	2
Nursing/Healthcare	2
Journalism	1
Maths	1
Law	1
Design	1
Sciences	1
Philosophy	1

N=17

Twenty-four percent of students (4/17) studied Social Sciences, making this the most popular subject across the sample. Eighteen percent (3/17) studied Medicine or Vetinary Science, and 12% (2/17) studied Nursing/Healthcare and Journalism. Table 5.2.2 shows a good mix of Arts/Humanities and Maths/ Science based subjects amongst the sample.

3 Existing support targeted at students from disadvantaged backgrounds

Wider policy initiatives

At the time of the study, students from disadvantaged backgrounds were already benefiting from widening participation initiatives introduced to open up higher education to everyone in society. Access Agreements and the AimHigher programme were discussed in Chapter 3.

Similarly the Education Maintenance Allowance was intended to encourage and enable disadvantaged young people to remain in education post 16. Encouraging young people to progress onto the next rung of the educational ladder is a key factor in whether or not they enter higher education. The Sutton Trust explored whether, taking into account exam results, children from poorer backgrounds were less likely to progress to university than their more privileged peers and found that,

it does not matter if you were eligible for free school meals or not, or indeed what results you achieved earlier on in school, if you get A-levels you are as highly likely as any other pupil to subsequently enrol on a degree course. The main problem in terms of widening access to higher education is getting non traditional students to A-levels in the first place (The Sutton Trust 2008, p6).

The recent decision to close the EMA scheme and replace it with a bursary scheme has therefore caused significant debate as to the impact it will have on access to higher education (Directgov 2011a).

Although policy initiatives such as these are aimed at individuals once they reach university or leading up to that point, they can be as beneficial in terms of shaping *habitus* and building *capital* as an individual's early life experiences.

Measures being taken by HEIs

Chapter 3 described the results of the internet questionnaire asking HEI staff about the types of support provided to students from disadvantaged backgrounds. This showed a wide range of outreach and 'on course' support available to students. However, it is not yet clear how changes to higher education funding implemented since circulation of the internet questionnaire will affect provision of outreach and 'on course' support for students. The widening participation measures being taken by individual institutions and the wider policy initiatives discussed above are examples of how students from disadvantaged backgrounds are supported to overcome deficits in their *capital*. They are also examples of provision that could affect an individual's *habitus*.

4 How do students from disadvantaged backgrounds fit within Bourdieu's typology?

The meaning of disadvantage in the current context

Before considering where students from disadvantaged backgrounds fit within Bourdieu's typology, we need to consider what is meant by the term 'disadvantage' within the current context. The definition of disadvantage within education and specifically within higher education has evolved over time as attempts have been made to identify members of this group more accurately. A number of different indicators have been used by practitioners and researchers to identify disadvantaged young people including the National Statistics Socio-economic Classification (NS-SEC), the Index of Multiple Deprivation, receipt of free school meals, having no family history of higher education, being disabled, or being a looked after child (HEFCE 2007). For the purposes of this study, disadvantaged students were selected on the basis that they had no family history of higher education and/ or they were in receipt of the full maintenance grant (indicating that they came from a low income family), as these represented two criteria which students could recognise as being applicable or not to their own situations. Chapter 2

discussed sampling criteria in greater detail. In relation to Bourdieu's theoretical framework, these indicators can be seen as proxies for belonging to a less powerful social group (HEFCE 2007).

One reason why a number of different indicators have historically been used to identify disadvantaged individuals within higher education is because disadvantage manifests itself in multiple ways. Disadvantage can start to impact before young people arrive at university. Social class has been found to influence the decision making process when selecting a university and course (Ball and colleagues 2002). There is a propensity for working class students to attend post-1992 universities, where there is an emphasis on encouraging applications from non traditional students, whilst middle class students attend pre-1992 universities which tend towards a more elite atmosphere (Reay and colleagues 2010). In terms of not having parents or family members with experience of higher education, Thomas and Quinn (2007) found first generation students were "structurally and culturally restricted by lack of knowledge about universities and how they worked, because their families had not had the opportunity to build up this store of experience" (p65).

Once at university, students with fewer financial means are more likely to need part-time employment to cover their outgoings, and this can have a negative impact by reducing their capacity to integrate fully into student life and concentrate on their studies (Metcalf 2003). Meeting accommodation costs has been found to cause difficulties for financially disadvantaged students. These individuals are more vulnerable in terms of the accommodation choices they are forced to make. (Christie and colleagues 2002). There is also a tendency for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to live at, or close to home to remain in a familiar setting (Christie and colleagues 2002; Reay and colleagues 2010). These forms of disadvantage may limit students' initial choice of institution and course. This may subsequently mean they do not immerse themselves fully in the university environment, missing out on opportunities due to the time spent in part-time work, or spent with family and friends from outside university.

The scale of advantage

If advantage is seen in terms of a scale, with students from supportive, affluent families with a history of higher education towards the higher end, one would expect to find students from low income backgrounds, those with no family history of higher education and care leavers at the lower end of the scale. However, although this may broadly be the case, the reality of the situation is less straightforward. Students in the current sample fulfil the chosen indicators of disadvantage in this study; coming from a low income background and/ or having no family history of higher education, yet they may still be relatively advantaged. Students fulfilling these criteria may only narrowly qualify as being disadvantaged, or they may be extremely disadvantaged. Equally, a student may be materially and emotionally disadvantaged across all aspects of their lives, or suffer disadvantage only in one specific area. It is therefore important to acknowledge the impact on students' lives of different degrees and types of disadvantage.

Comparative levels of disadvantage: comparing students from disadvantaged backgrounds and students from traditional backgrounds

Historically the image of the traditional undergraduate student has been that of a white, middle class eighteen year old from a comfortable background. However, this is an unhelpful and out of date image to use as a benchmark when considering the experiences of students from disadvantaged backgrounds (Walsh and Colleagues 2009). It creates an unrealistic picture of today's average student in higher education, distorting the true gap between the experiences of these groups.

Little reference has been found in the literature to the level of support experienced by traditional or average students and what does exist, focuses predominantly on the financial elements of support. Callender and Kemp (2000) found that amongst full-time students, the family was an essential source of financial support. Students have been found to generally take some

form of financial support from their parents as a 'given' in the form of regular allowances. These payments are also supplemented with additional small, one off amounts, either as cash or shopping (Christie and Munro 2001). Significant non financial support identified as helping students includes; supporting a student's decision to enter higher education; providing a safety net in an emergency; and providing a home base to which students can return to receive practical support (Christie 2005).

In relation to Bourdieu's framework on social structure, students from traditional backgrounds should most easily make the transition into the *field of higher education* based on their *habitus* and the *capital* they possess. Their *habitus*, the dispositions which influence how they act and the decisions they make in specific circumstances will derive from their experience of being supported by parents as they progress towards higher education and having their achievements valued. The financial and non financial support identified above provides individuals with various form of valuable *capital*. As Christie (2005) concludes, "... parental support is critical in determining the options available to students" (p2). Consequently, students from more traditional backgrounds should be better prepared than students from more disadvantaged backgrounds to make the most of the opportunities available to them at university and possess the tools, in the form of *capital*, to realise those opportunities.

However, just as students from disadvantaged backgrounds experience differing degrees of disadvantage, students from traditional backgrounds will have experienced varying levels of advantage. Traditional students will come from households with differing levels of available resources. The ability of parents to support their children financially or otherwise will differ as will the relationships between parent and child. So although we may expect students from traditional backgrounds to occupy the more advantaged end of the scale, this may not always be the case and there will be some overlap with those students from care or other disadvantaged backgrounds.

This chapter has so far explored what is meant by a disadvantaged background and how individuals in this group compare to traditional higher education students in terms of the degree of disadvantage they face. The types of support measures available to students coming from disadvantaged backgrounds have also been discussed, highlighting the range of support provision available at a national and institutional level. The remainder of this chapter will consider the experiences of the students from disadvantaged backgrounds interviewed in the course of this study. The aim is to gain a better understanding of the issues these students face when accessing support in practice. The aim is also to identify where deficits in *capital* or *habitus* exist which are negatively impacting their experiences of higher education, and how existing support measures are helping students to overcome those deficits. Discussion focuses first on financial issues (*economic capital*) and then non financial issues (*social/cultural capital*).

5 Financial issues (*economic capital*)

The *economic capital* required to participate in higher education is significant. In addition to paying tuition fees, accommodation costs and course equipment, funds are needed to participate fully in the non academic side of student life. The normative student experience traditionally involves financial support from parents to meet costs such as accommodation, and increasingly involves loan, grants and part-time employment (Christie and colleagues 2002). However, for students from certain disadvantaged backgrounds including those from low income families, financial contribution by parents or family may be unfeasible resulting in a potential deficit in *economic capital*. The potential consequences of insufficient income on students' academic work and lifestyle choices were discussed earlier in this chapter. Overall, possessing insufficient *economic capital* can reduce an individual's quality of life.

Forms of financial support received by students from disadvantaged backgrounds

Eleven of the seventeen (65%) disadvantaged students interviewed were in receipt of a full maintenance grant, meaning that they came from households with total incomes below £25,000 (Directgov 2011b). The majority of students described managing to cope financially, although for some it was difficult, particularly towards the end of each term when cash flow was low. Students' main sources of *economic capital* were tuition and maintenance loans. Many received means tested Access to Learning Fund or related bursaries from their HEIs and several worked during term and holiday times. Most received no, or very little money from parents except for birthdays, Christmas or in an emergency. These students therefore differ from the traditional students described by Christie and Munro (2001) who see regular financial support from parents as a 'given'.

The sample revealed differing degrees of financial disadvantage; from students who were entirely self reliant, living on their available funding subsidized by employment income, to students who were receiving regular contributions from family and had savings or in one case inheritance to fall back on. A number of those interviewed would therefore have been in a more secure financial position than some students from middle class backgrounds, highlighting the overlap between different groups of students.

In addition to identifying the different sources of *economic capital* possessed by students from disadvantaged backgrounds, the interviews highlighted issues affecting how students used their money.

Meeting the costs of higher education

In a study of the experiences of recent graduates from different social backgrounds, Cooke and colleagues (2004) found that finance was a concern for most students, but particularly "for students from disadvantaged

backgrounds, especially in comparison with students from professional backgrounds.” (p418)

Interviews with students in the present study revealed that meeting the cost of university life was a primary concern and that some felt that the cost implications were not always recognised.

“[The University] don't seem to be aware that some students can't afford [field trips].” (Maggie, aged 18, post 1992 HEI)

Although the participants in this study were not ultimately deterred from applying to university by the cost, there will have been other individuals academically capable of going to university who were deterred. Existing research has found that debt aversion is a deterrent to applying for university and that low income students are more debt averse than students from middle and high income households (Callender and Jackson 2005).

The National Union of Students has estimated that, the average graduate leaves university with over £20,000 of debt (National Union of Student 2008). This figure is expected to climb from 2012 following the increase in tuition fees to approximately £39,000 (BBC 2011). This combination of high cost and debt aversion, therefore, creates a barrier to students from disadvantaged backgrounds trying to deviate from the trajectory expected of those in their social group.

Although students in the current study have overcome this barrier to reach university, the fear of debt felt by members of certain social groups may prevent them fully exploiting the *economic capital* they do possess whilst at university (Pennell and West 2005). This may result in students living very cautiously, for example limiting their social activities or trying to survive without taking the loan funding available to them. Although exercising financial caution is a valuable quality as students attend university primarily to study rather than socialise, a certain amount of social activity provides a life/work balance. Being able to participate in the non academic or extra curricular

aspects of university life also provides an opportunity to develop *cultural* and *social capital* which may be beneficial to a student beyond graduation.

“It's not about doing [extra curricular activities] for yourself.... especially at [a prestigious HEI]... if you don't do these things, you will not get a job. They're almost more important than the degree. You make your contacts doing [extra curricular activities] and that's all the stuff you put on your CV... If you don't do volunteer work and join a society and all these things, you won't get a job.” (Cassie, aged 21, Russell Group HEI)

Being adequately prepared to cope financially was important to students.

“I think university life would be a lot more enjoyable certainly if you're a lot more prepared for it. I mean there's the finance aspect. If some of the students were prepared financially, they wouldn't have to spend half the time eating soup everyday.” (Paul, aged 27, pre 1992 HEI)

However, views were mixed on how far it was possible to teach people financial skills in advance of entering higher education. One student thought these were skills learnt through practice.

“I think it's something you kind of learn, what you can and cannot spend. It's not something someone else can tell you.” (Gemma, aged 20, post 1992 HEI)

Another suggested advice was needed at school.

“I think university, it's too late often. I think it's got to be done in school.... in the preparation period when you're applying for university. It won't take that long even just to help the students plan out their budgets over the year, or three years as well.” (Paul, aged 27, pre 1992 HEI)

Awareness of financial support

Overall, there was a lack of awareness amongst the students interviewed of the financial support available to them. In some cases, this resulted in individuals missing out on funds they were entitled to access, depriving them of valuable *economic capital*. This lack of awareness also demonstrates how intertwined the operation of the different forms of *capital* can be. A deficit in *social capital* where students do not have individuals such as parents within their support networks ensuring they are made aware of their financial entitlements can lead directly to a deficit in *economic capital*. Students without family experience of higher education are therefore particularly at risk of experiencing this dual deficit in *capital*. Ensuring awareness amongst students is important as a HEI could offer the best support in the world, yet it is worthless if potential recipients do not know about it. The ease with which it is possible to miss out on potential funding was demonstrated by the importance of word of mouth amongst those interviewed. Michelle was unaware of a bursary for which she was eligible until her flatmate informed her. In turn she told someone else. Steven only found out about money available through the Access to Learning Fund via a housemate in his third year, when he had been in financial difficulty for a while.

“It would have been nice to have known beforehand because it wasn’t till I was in trouble... and I wasI’d been in trouble for a little while... I hadn’t had any money when [my friend] mentioned [the Access to Learning Fund]. So if I’d known about it beforehand, I suppose I could have applied for it as soon as I was in trouble rather than having to wait a couple of weeks.” (Steven, aged 24, Russell Group HEI)

Approaching the university to enquire about possible support implies a sense of entitlement and expectation that support should be available, or in other words, possession of a certain *habitus*. However, it has been found that non traditional students in the UK tend to lack these qualities (Reay and colleagues 2010; Thomas and Quinn 2007). Students feeling out of place in the *field of higher education* are also unlikely to put themselves in a position

that singles them out. Potentially this results in a situation where those most in need of support are least likely to ask for it due to being out of their comfort zones in the higher education environment. Conversely, students from the most privileged backgrounds, least in need of assistance will feel comfortable and sufficiently assured of their position to ask for help. Already advantaged students are therefore in a better position to benefit from support than disadvantaged students who are potentially in greatest need.

A situation where those most in need are least well positioned to access help, supports an argument for pro-active widening participation and student support to overcome any reticence or unwillingness amongst the least advantaged students in seeking support. Chapter 3 discussed the various approaches to support being taken by HEI staff and the conflict they faced between providing hands on support and treating students as young independent adults. The experiences of students from disadvantaged backgrounds in this study suggest that pro-activity is required to make students aware of the available support. Chapter 4 will consider whether lack of support awareness was equally an issue for the care leavers interviewed in the course of this study.

The structure of financial support

The students from disadvantaged backgrounds expressed some confusion as to how the money they received was broken down between loans, grants and bursaries and seeking clarification from the university did not necessarily remedy the situation. Nina visited the finance office each term to check what funding she would receive and described finding a lack of organisation.

“When you contact them, they never seem to know what’s going on..... and it’s not that clear who deals with which bursaries” (Nina, aged 21, Russell Group HEI)

A lack of clarity over funding may greatly impact upon the decisions and actions of individuals with limited means. If students do not feel in control of

their finances, they may take decisions such as not committing to field trips, or choosing accommodation based purely on cost rather than suitability. In the long term, these decisions may prevent students from building up further *capital* through participation in student life.

Some of the students interviewed from disadvantaged backgrounds identified a lack of flexibility within the structure of financial support, which created unnecessary difficulties. Steven had problems accessing emergency support when an error by the Student Loans Company meant his loan payment was delayed. Without the student loan, he was ineligible for money from the Access to Learning Fund and he could not apply for money from the hardship fund as he had not applied for the Access to Learning Fund. As he reached the stage where he could not afford to buy food, someone told him about leftover food from professional development courses run by the faculty.

“And that kept me through for about two weeks. I managed to live on the free food I got from [the continuing professional development courses], which was very useful as I’d basically lived on a diet of pasta and tomato puree before then.” (Steven, aged 24, Russell Group HEI)

In terms of the timing of loan and grant instalments, some students suggested payments could be made slightly earlier to help cover rent payable before the start of term. Having the money ahead of the start of term was also considered reassuring. Views were mixed on how the instalment payments of loans and grants should be structured.

Term time and holiday employment

Existing research has shown that students from less advantaged backgrounds are more likely to be engaged in part-time employment than their peers from more privileged backgrounds and also work for longer hours (Barke and colleagues 2000; Metcalfe 2003). Working during term has been found to negatively impact upon academic achievement (Barke and colleagues 2000; Callender and Kemp 2000; Metcalfe 2003).

The vast majority of the students interviewed described needing part-time employment during term time and in the holiday periods to survive financially. The money earned was crucial for several individuals to pay outgoings such as rent or living expenses either where loans were late arriving or payments needed to be made before grants or loan instalments were due. Wages also covered unexpected expenses which were by definition, difficult to budget for.

“There are a lot of outlays that you don't expect.” (Cassandra, aged 21, Russell Group HEI)

These students were therefore experiencing a trade off between building short and long term *capital*. They required *economic capital* in the short term to meet their living costs. However, time spent in employment rather than studying for good degree results or participating in student life has longer term implications for their acquisition of *economic, cultural* and *social capital*.

Financial maturity

As most young people remain in the family home until their early 20s (Stein 2006), one would expect undergraduate students to remain dependent to some extent on the support of their parents whilst at university. This is supported by research showing parental support to be essential amongst full-time students (Callender and Kemp, 2000). Jackson and colleagues (2005) also refer to an expectation amongst ordinary parents that they will support their children through the entirety of their degree courses. Interviews with the students from disadvantaged backgrounds in this study found that many of the students, even from low income backgrounds, relied upon their parents to a degree for financial support, even if it was limited or occasional. Cassie, one of the most financially secure students interviewed acknowledges the importance of having parents able to provide a financial safety net.

“...if you haven’t got parents that will give you... give you a bung... if you don’t have parents who can do that, it’s just.. like... difficult.”

(Cassie, aged 21, Russell Group HEI)

Andrew described how his parents had provided him with a financial safety net.

“I mean... I went to get some petrol and my card was declined for some reason. I had money in there but couldn’t get any money out and I was having a panic attack so I just rang my dad and said I’m really, really stuck. I need to put petrol in my car and I need to come home and he paid for it over the phone with his card which was really good. I wouldn’t know what I would’ve done if he didn’t...” (Andrew, aged 20, post 1992 HEI)

The reassurance provided by this safety net is important at a time of emerging adulthood. It enables students to sail a little close to the wind occasionally as they learn to assume their independence. It enables them to stretch their *economic capital* as far as it will go to get the most from their time in higher education.

However, despite the expected reliance of some students on their parents, there was an unexpected level of financial independence and maturity amongst the students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Even where their parents could afford to contribute to some extent, some individuals expected to be entirely financially independent at university. Tom (aged 23, post 1992 HEI) chose to work for a year before starting university and disliked the idea of his parents feeling under pressure to support him financially. Gemma (aged 20, post 1992 HEI) saved up to buy everything she would need to live away from home as she had not expected her parents to purchase these items for her.

Overall, the interviews suggest that the majority of students from disadvantaged backgrounds need to be more self-reliant than those whose

parents have the luxury of being able to support them indefinitely. Even where parents are financially able to assist occasionally or in the event of an emergency, students are assuming responsibility for their own day to day living costs. Chapter 6 will explore whether this characteristic is also reflected amongst care leavers and, therefore, whether it is a common factor shared by members of both groups of students, which differentiates them from their more advantaged peers.

6 Non financial issues (social and cultural capital)

In addition to the *economic capital* required to participate in higher education, other forms of *capital* also play a key role in determining whether young people apply to university and have positive experiences as undergraduates. As discussed in Chapter 1, possession of *social capital* means a student has the ability to rely upon contacts and networks, either formed by the student themselves, or developed by family or friends. For example, a student in the current sample who described being able to rely upon his tutor for information and support was drawing upon a support network. Students whose parents have the necessary contacts to arrange work experience for them is benefiting from the social networks and therefore *social capital* of their parents. The level of *social capital* possessed by a student is dictated by the size and composition of their support network. An extensive network will provide the greatest choice of whom to approach for support in a specific situation. Networks comprising powerful individuals from the most dominant social groups will provide a student with better opportunities to build their own levels of *capital* than a network comprising individuals from less powerful social groups. One would therefore expect students from the most advantaged backgrounds to possess the most *social capital*. However, as discussed earlier in this chapter, this is not always the case. A student could be disadvantaged economically yet have an extensive and effective social network providing them with a high level of *social capital*. Just as with *economic capital*, there may be a degree of overlap between students from different backgrounds.

Cultural capital, although difficult to narrowly define, has been described as a “form of value associated with culturally authorised tastes, consumption patterns, attributes, skills and award” (Webb and colleagues 2002, *glossary*) and can be seen in many areas of university life. Bourdieu identifies three forms of *cultural capital*: the *embodied state*, i.e. *cultural capital* acquired over time forming part of an individual’s disposition; the *objectified state*, i.e. cultural goods such as books or artworks; and the *institutionalised state*, i.e. educational qualifications which confer a certain value of cultural capital upon the owner (Bourdieu 1986). Students growing up within dominant social groups who are brought up to feel a sense of entitlement to higher education are exhibiting *cultural capital* in its *embodied state*. They may have easier access than their peers to cultural goods whilst growing up, whether that is in the form of books or the best sporting equipment. They may also enter higher education having already acquired significant *cultural capital* in its *institutionalised state* by holding qualifications from highly regarded schools.

Students from less powerful social groups are likely to have fewer of the social and cultural advantages of students from dominant social groups, arriving at university possessing less of these forms of *capital*. Consequently, they have less *social* and *cultural capital* to build upon as undergraduates. This potentially leads to the difference between the levels of capital held by the two groups growing wider whilst in higher education, further compounding the inequality between them. Widening participation and student support provision are therefore key in providing students from less powerful social groups with the tools to help them overcome any deficits in *social*, *cultural* and *economic capital*.

The remainder of this section considers the impact of various aspects of non financial support on the higher education experiences of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. It identifies where students have experienced deficits in *social* and *cultural capital* and where student support provision has helped them to overcome these deficits.

The route into higher education

The majority of students from disadvantaged backgrounds took a direct route from school into higher education. With the exception of two mature students returning to higher education after several years in employment, the disadvantaged students progressed continuously from GCSEs to A Levels or BTEC qualifications and then on to higher education. A number also chose to take a gap year to work or travel. With the exception of one disadvantaged student, they all possessed the standard entry qualifications required for their institutions. Only one interviewee described real difficulty obtaining offers from HEIs and had to go through the clearing system. However, this was because he held an International Baccalaureate, which universities were unwilling to consider and not because he lacked qualifications. The routes taken by the students from disadvantaged backgrounds therefore resemble those expected of students from 'traditional' backgrounds. Chapter 6 will consider the routes taken by the care leavers in this study.

Encouragement to succeed educationally

Being encouraged to succeed and valuing education provides young people with a source of *cultural capital*. Society places a value on being educated and possessing qualifications. In an increasingly knowledge based economy, a better education is seen as leading to better employment (Brown and colleagues 2008). Education provides a means for the least advantaged groups in society to move away from the expected trajectory of their lives by providing them with opportunities to build their *social, cultural and economic capital*. The Labour government identified the role of education in promoting equality of opportunity for all in society, which led to initiatives such as AimHigher, designed to encourage more students from non traditional backgrounds to go to university (Lister 1998).

The majority of students in the current sample described being encouraged to go to university by family and/ or school. Michelle described being encouraged by her teachers to go to university, describing it as, “a natural

progression.” Tom, who chose to work for a period rather than go straight to university felt that there would have been a lot of support from his college had he applied directly.

”It was generally accepted that students would apply for university.
.....There was such an emphasis on going to uni. It seemed that any other path was a deviant path.” (Tom, aged 23, post 1992 HEI)

Four (4/17) students from disadvantaged backgrounds described attending private or grammar schools, although the data does not show whether these individuals gained scholarships to attend or their families were able to fund them. These students in particular described a culture of high aspiration where progression to higher education was expected. Kyla described the prevailing attitude at her school,

“You were brainy if you went to Oxbridge. You were normal if you went to uni.” (Kyla, aged 19, pre 1992 HEI)

In 2009/10, 88.8% of young entrants to full-time first degree courses attended state schools or colleges as opposed to private schools (HESA 2011b). This means that if pupils at private schools do receive more encouragement than state pupils, experiences such as Kyla's are those of only a small percentage of the population. Amongst those students, an even smaller percentage will come from disadvantaged backgrounds. Ironically, it is students from the least advantaged backgrounds who stand to benefit most from such encouragement and expectation, as they possess less *cultural, social and economic capital* than those from more powerful social groups.

A number of the students interviewed identified activities arranged or encouraged by their schools which were designed to strengthen their chances of entering higher education. Tabitha's school encouraged pupils to take Key Skills Qualifications such as communication alongside their A Levels to broaden their skills. Cassandra participated in activities funded by her school, but run by an external company for potential Oxbridge applicants. She thought

there was a lack of awareness amongst school pupils of the activities available to increase their chances of getting into higher education.

“People don't know what's out there. Especially with the sort of people I went to school with. It's not that they lacked any ability. It's that they lacked knowledge of what they could achieve because it's not just... it's not there.... it's like an attitude of complacency.” (Cassandra, aged 21, Russell Group HEI)

There were some examples of the adults in students' lives having limited expectations of them. Maggie described coming from an area where higher education was not considered an option and consequently wanted to prove people wrong.

“So I'm quite proud of myself to be here.” (Maggie, aged 18, post 1992 HEI)

Tabitha was told that a prestigious university she was considering might not be right for her as it tended to attract a lot of students from privileged backgrounds.

“So the one feedback I did get from a teacher was quite negative like that. So I was like, ‘Oh thank you for crushing those hopes.’” (Tabitha, aged 20, post 1992 HEI)

Three students described receiving little or no advice and encouragement from their schools.

“You were completely left to your own devices.” (Paul, aged 27, pre 1992 HEI)

However, where this occurred, their parents provided the necessary support and advice instead, meaning that the young people in question were not being left to make decisions and negotiate the application process alone. It was

also not just those parents with experience of higher education who provided support and encouragement to their children. Parents who did not have any personal higher education experience also encouraged their children to aspire and achieve.

“I think I was lucky because I had parents who wanted me to go, and for me to take the opportunity they didn’t have.” (Grace, aged 20, pre 1992 HEI)

The role of parents in encouraging their children to aspire educationally is likely to become even more important in the coming years in view of the increasing competition for university places. In 2010, UCAS recorded an 11.6% rise in the number of higher education applicants in the UK, whilst reductions have been made in higher education funding and tuition fees have increased (UCAS 2010). In this situation, those from the least powerful social groups such as first generation students and those from low income families are likely to be at the greatest risk of missing out on higher education as they do not possess, or have access to the *economic, social and cultural capital* of the most dominant groups in society. The role of parents is therefore significant for disadvantaged students as a source of support and encouragement if they are not to be deterred from going to university.

Many students described their parents or teachers instilling them with the idea that higher education was something to aspire to and within their reach. Both of Kyla’s parents were graduates and it was always assumed that she would go to university.

“It was almost seen as your next school.” (Kyla, aged 19, pre 1992 HEI)

A proportion of the students interviewed therefore appear to have benefited from levels of encouragement closer to those received by students from more privileged or traditional backgrounds.

Social capital provided by support networks

Disadvantaged students described receiving valuable non financial support from their parents, even where their parents had no personal experience of higher education. For example, Tabitha knew she could rely upon her parents' support regardless of how well she did.

“It's been brilliant. They're always on the end of a phone and always positive about everything. They've never If I didn't get the grades... they'd never say oh come on, you've got to buck your ideas up. It'd be oh it doesn't matter, you've done your best.” (Tabitha, aged 20, post 1992 HEI)

Knowing they had the support and encouragement of parents was very reassuring to those interviewed. In addition to that support, students described having a network of support outside of university consisting of teachers, friends and siblings. This provided students with a solid base on which to move to university and develop further supportive relationships. In terms of a student's *habitus* or disposition, their prior experiences of being surrounded by a supportive network of individuals makes them likely to expect to develop similar supportive relationships in higher education, either with other students or staff. This building of new supportive relationships is significant as Walsh, Larsen and Parry (2009) found that when faced with personal issues, higher education students “principally relied on the peers on their course and to a lesser degree on family and friends (p419).” Wilcox, Winn and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) also highlight the importance of building new supportive relationships, arguing that the process of successfully settling into university life involves developing supportive relationships that replace home relationships during term time.

Support during the application process

Cultural and *social capitals* play an important role when students are completing the university application process. For many students, this will be the first time they have completed a formal application where they are required to market themselves to prospective HEIs. They also have to make important decisions about which institutions and courses to apply for, decisions that could affect the rest of their lives. Students instilled by their parents and schools with high levels of *cultural capital* may be most aware of the differing levels of prestige attached to HEIs and courses and take this into account in their decision making processes. Advantaged students possessing the most *social capital* are likely to be assisted with their UCAS application by someone who has been to university themselves, or understands the qualities HEIs are looking for in their potential undergraduates. This is important, particularly where a student is applying for the most oversubscribed courses such as law or medicine. One would expect disadvantaged students, especially those with no family history of higher education to therefore be at a deficit in this respect, compared to their more advantaged peers.

The majority of students interviewed in the disadvantaged group received support completing the university application (UCAS) form and funding application both from school and their parents. In several cases, specific lesson time was set aside to complete the UCAS form, which was valued by students.

“It was a good approach..... especially when they were there, saying deadlines are coming up. They put pressure on.... ‘You’ve got to get them done’. If you were left to your own accord.. say... I was at college or home study, I probably would never have got round to doing it.”

(Tabitha, aged 20, post 1992 HEI)

Tom, who took a year out before starting university, was confident that his school would have provided support.

“I think if I had been going straight on to university there would have been loads and loads of support.” (Tom, aged 23, post 1992 HEI)

For some students, completing the UCAS application process and entering higher education was a frightening time. However, most students received support to overcome any difficulties. Molly found that her school's approach of giving students the opportunity to look at the UCAS form, listen to a talk by the school careers service and ask questions, “made it less scary” (Molly, aged 19, pre 1992 HEI).

Students found completion of the personal statement the most challenging section of the UCAS form, as it involved writing about themselves rather than answering closed questions. The majority of students described receiving at least some assistance from their schools. Michelle received a lot of help from her form tutor and Tabitha received help redrafting her statement from an English teacher, with whom she had a good relationship. These are examples of students using their *social capital* to their advantage.

However, a number of students were conscious of deficits in support. Paul received no assistance from his school and wrote his personal statement the morning of the UCAS application deadline. Although he was ultimately successful in securing a place in higher education, it was not at his first choice of HEI.

“If I'd had adequate support, I'd maybe have got into the university of my choice.” (Paul, aged 27, pre 1992 HEI)

Cassandra applied to some of the most prestigious institutions and found the personal statement particularly difficult as she was concerned she would have insufficient extra curricular activities compared to candidates from private schools. In situations where applicants are all expected to achieve the required A Level grades, the *cultural capital* provided by extra curricular activities provides admissions tutors with a means of differentiating between candidates of similar academic ability.

Attending open days

Attending higher education open days is an example of students exercising their *cultural capital* as they make judgements about different HEIs. Students from more advantaged backgrounds who have developed a strong sense of entitlement are likely to be more demanding in terms of what an HEI should offer to students. There is a risk that young people lacking in *cultural capital* may not have this sense of entitlement and therefore not make the most of the opportunity to find out what each HEI can offer.

Nearly all of the students interviewed attended at least one open day and in most cases, attended multiple events. Several students went to open days with friends, although even the most independent students relied on their parents to accompany them.

“No one was available to come with me to [the open day for her university] so I said, ‘Mum come with me, I’d like you to. This is probably the one I’m probably going to go to so come along with me’ and she was saying she was dead proud as well.” (Victoria, aged 21, post 1992 HEI) [One of the most independent students]

Parents were also seen as a valuable presence as they could ask those questions a student might not feel comfortable or entitled to ask and in one case, took notes of what support was available to students.

The students interviewed did not appear to expect to come away from an open day having seen a day in the life of a student. They were very realistic about the extent of what they could learn in one or two days. Seeing the campus, where they would be living and getting an idea of the teaching methods used at HEIs were the types of activity that students remember most clearly from their open day visits. They particularly valued having the opportunity to ask questions of existing students, suggesting that students

may not have felt sufficiently confident to ask questions freely of staff members.

“[Existing students at the open day] were happy to answer. They just made you feel that you weren't asking a stupid question.” (Molly, aged 19, pre 1992 HEI)

Andrew was particularly impressed by the clarity of the information he received at one open day.

“Everyone was just so honest and down to earth and there was no ‘Oh well you might do this and you might do this.’ It’s ‘You’re gonna do this and you’re gonna that. This is where you’re going to live. This is how much you’re going to have. It’s really good in this way. It’s really bad in that way. Take it or leave it.” (Andrew, aged 20, post 1992 HEI)

When asked what information they received about student support services on open days, the majority of students could remember very little. Whether this was because they did not receive much information, or because they had forgotten, it may imply that they did not have any pressing concerns linked to this area and that student support was less of an immediate priority than other issues.

The interviews therefore suggest that although students from disadvantaged backgrounds may be expected to feel less of a sense of entitlement when visiting a campus than their more privileged peers, they gained a valuable insight into university life. It was still an opportunity for students to build on their levels of *cultural capital*.

Awareness of non financial support

As with financial support, discussed earlier in this chapter, the most comprehensive package of practical and emotional support is worthless unless students are aware of its existence. Merely being aware of support

could have a positive influence on a student's *habitus* and consequently influence their decisions and actions. For example, knowing there are study skills courses available may make a student feel more optimistic about their chances of gaining high grades and influence them to select a challenging module on their course.

Most of those interviewed assumed they had received some form of information on student support services at the start of their courses, even if they could not recall exactly what that had been. Some students recalled having been given handbooks containing useful information on support prior to the start of their courses.

"I knew where I was going then. I knew who I needed to contact if I needed something, so it was very helpful." (Maggie, aged 18, post 1992 HEI)

Being made aware of who to contact in certain situations also establishes the beginnings of a support network and provides students with an opportunity to build up their *social capital*.

Several students recalled meeting a personal tutor, or there being introductory lectures from support services such as finance or careers. Students from both older and newer universities felt they had been given information on support, although it was those at newer universities who spoke most positively about their experience. This ties in with research suggesting that approaches to student support vary depending upon the type institution in question and the demography of the students it attracts (Crozier and colleagues 2008).

Students were not overly concerned about knowing the specifics of the support available to them. The overriding view was that support was likely to exist and they would manage to find it if, and when they needed it. Although those students interviewed acknowledged that student support was not high on their lists of priorities until they were in need of assistance, they did want services to be well advertised and support staff to be pro-active in engaging

with students. Those interviewed wanted support staff to be approachable and it was suggested that meeting staff in person at introductory lectures made students feel more at ease in accessing services. Those interviewed also wanted to know who services were aimed at. For example, one student said that until her final year she had thought that some study skills support was aimed only at students who were struggling academically. Informing students of available support and the mechanisms for accessing it provides *social and cultural capital* which can be used as and when required. This compensates for some of the support that might be provided to more advantaged students by their parents. Taking a pro-active approach to support provision also helps overcome any reluctance to ask for support where the *habitus* of students, developed as a result of previous experiences, means they lack the necessary sense of entitlement to seek out any help they feel they need.

Once students were made aware of the available support, there was a feeling that ultimately individuals had to take responsibility for themselves by reading the information sent to them and acting upon it.

“You’ll find there’s a lot of people who whinge about things, but if we’ve been told where we can get help for that, and you’re not willing to get the help, then you can’t be whingeing.” (Gemma, aged 20, post 1992 HEI)

Although HEIs can take certain steps to provide disadvantaged students with the tools, in the form of *capital*, to improve their circumstances, it is up to the individual student to decide to take the opportunities available to them. As such, higher education is a time for emerging independence. As discussed in Chapter 3, this raises issues for staff in finding a balance between fostering independence and effectively supporting those facing the greatest deficits in *capital*.

Gaining access to support

Being made aware of student support provides disadvantaged students with *capital*, which they can use to improve their circumstances and deviate from the life course trajectory expected of individuals from their social background. However, even where students described being given the information necessary to access *capital* in the form of student support, some identified further obstacles preventing them from using it.

“I mean there are so many barriers you’ve got to get over to go and get any type of support, ‘cause you feel like, ‘I’m an adult, I shouldn’t need this support.” (Vicky, aged 21, post 1992 HEI)

Vicky’s reluctance to access support can be viewed as a consequence of her *habitus*, formed by prior experience, of being in the unfamiliar *field of higher education*, and because of the levels of *capital* she possesses. Student support providers therefore need to do everything they can to overcome the barriers students feel to accessing support. Walsh, Larsen and Parry’s (2009) study explored the positive factors influencing student retention. They considered accessibility of support and found that certain factors can make one type of support appear more accessible than another.

Students also characterised this relationship [with tutors] as ‘informal’ in nature and it may have been the potential spontaneity characteristic of the support that made it so appealing. Students may perceive the need to make an ‘appointment’ as a barrier or excuse not to use the more specialist university support services (Walsh, Larsen and Parry 2009, p417).

Once the students in the current study made the decision to access support, they wanted to access services discretely and with ease. Being signposted to support by staff in the Student Union was thought to work well by one student.

“They're so helpful. You can go in with anything and they'll point you in the right direction to someone who knows.” (Maggie, aged 18, post 1992 HEI)

Having face to face contact with staff members who were familiar and approachable was valued.

“Any problems you had... any sort of thing... you just go in and they'll know exactly what to do to help you out. They'll sit you down and talk to you about it and... they're wonderful people [in student support].” (Paul, aged 27, pre 1992 HEI)

Having face to face contact in this way arguably makes it more likely that a supportive relationship will result than through less personal forms of contact. This provides the best opportunity for students to increase their levels of *capital*.

Andrew found that being on a relatively small campus meant that staff got to know students as individuals. One of his parents had been in contact with student support services during the application process so staff recognised his name.

“Oh you're Andrew! We know who you are. Come and find us and here's our card and we live in this building over here'..... It's what I liked...everyone knows each other.” (Andrew, aged 20, post 1992 HEI)

For Andrew this was a positive experience, although other students may have found the possibility of anonymity preferable.

Vicky found that talking to welfare staff helped her when she was considering withdrawing from university. She valued not feeling they were just going through the motions.

“They were very genuine and student directed.” (Vicky, aged 21, post 1992 HEI)

This personalised support where a relationship is formed, however briefly, between student and staff member goes some way to replicating the individualised support a student expects from their parents or family. Such relationship may not provide the same level of *social capital* as a parent provides, but does offer sufficient *social capital* in the form of support and reassurance to create a bridge for students making the transition from dependent to independent adult.

Kyla received support for her dyslexia, but would have preferred a staff member to sit down and talk things through with her instead of being given leaflets to read. By not providing face to face support, there is a risk that the student will disengage from the support process and miss an opportunity to build up their levels of *capital*.

Tutors and personal advisers were mentioned repeatedly by students as sources of support, although views on the effectiveness of tutoring systems were very mixed within the sample. Where students felt tutors showed genuine interest in their welfare and made it known that they were available, they were considered to be a valuable source of support.

“I think that’s important for a personal tutor.. to be approachable and help out if needed like.” (Kyla, aged 19, pre 1992 HEI)

However, Michelle did not find the tutor system to be so useful.

“I don’t see the point of personal tutors at all. I think it’s just a system that seems good but in reality it doesn’t work [.....] They are supposed to know you, but I don’t know my personal tutor at all. I definitely wouldn’t go to her if I had any problems or anything.” (Michelle, aged 21, Russell Group HEI)

Whether undergraduates were assigned a tutor who considered pastoral support as integral to their role and whether they connected with their students on a personal level was essentially down to chance. Tabitha was assigned a tutor with whom she developed a good relationship.

"I think it's really nice that you're assigned one person. You keep that person for three years." (Tabitha, aged 20, post 1992 HEI)

Steven described a system operating in his department where students had multiple sources of support from two tutors and a buddy who was a student in a later year.

"So it fits for the different types of people, also the different situations..... I think the choice is a really good idea." (Steven, aged 24, Russell Group HEI)

Steven also appreciated the opportunity to discuss issues with someone of a similar age.

"I think [the departmental support system] works excellently. It's personal choice, so some people react differently to different age groups. So some people will feel really uncomfortable talking about a personal issue with an older person." (Steven, aged 24, Russell Group HEI)

Molly felt that having a choice of whom to talk to was important. Her HEI used students in a welfare adviser capacity.

"I can see the benefits of having [students working as welfare advisers]. You might find it easier to approach them, but there have been times when I don't want to approach because I know them and I know that they're meant to be in that role, you know, and you talk to them confidentially... they're not to judge you etc, but still it doesn't take away the fact that it's somebody that you know and you might

have had to speak to at dinner or you chatted to in the bar. I'd like it to be somebody a bit more removed." (Molly, aged 19, pre 1992 HEI)

7 Conclusion

The interviews with disadvantaged students revealed they were generally coping on the *economic capital* available to them, suggesting the financial support they were receiving was for the most part adequate. Overall, the levels of disadvantage within the sample varied from students with a substantial inheritance or wealthy parents to those who were entirely self-reliant. The interviews revealed how students were attempting to be financially mature and independent, even where there was some family support available to them. This reflects the fact that many undergraduate students are going through a period of emerging independence where they are attempting to assume responsibility for themselves as adults. The majority of students described working part-time during university terms, placing them at a disadvantage to more affluent students and having a potentially negative impact on their degree results. Although the income from paid work makes up for any deficit they may be experiencing in *economic capital*, they risk missing out on the *social* and *cultural capital* gained through participating fully in university life and working hard to secure a good degree.

In terms of non financial matters, the students described receiving support from a number of sources, with family and parents playing a central role. For example, parents were described as supporting and encouraging students in the period leading up to university, and throughout the important application process, even where they had no first hand experience of higher education themselves. This provided students with *social capital* in the form of a support network and *cultural capital*, for example, by teaching young people to value education.

The interviews highlight the importance of support awareness. Students described experiencing difficulties in finding out about the availability of support. The lack of clarity in the information supplied also created potential

problems for students. An element of luck was often involved, with students finding out about support through word of mouth rather than through official channels. This implies that there may be many students who never hear about support which would make their lives much easier. As a consequence, there will be students who are unnecessarily experiencing deficits in *economic, social or cultural capital*.

Overall, students wanted universities to be pro-active in their support. Students valued face to face contact and being treated as individuals. This supports the more hands-on approach described by some of the HEI staff in Chapter 3.

The interviews suggest that although the students come from disadvantaged backgrounds, their experiences are in some ways similar to those of more privileged or 'traditional' students. For example, the students interviewed described receiving encouragement and non financial support from their schools and families, even where they were the first in their families to enter higher education. Whether this is also true of the experiences of care leavers, who may not have relationships with their birth families, will be explored in the next chapter. These may be circumstances where care leavers face a deficit in *capital*, in which case it will be necessary to consider what is being done in terms of support to address it. Finally, despite the financial independence demonstrated by students from disadvantaged backgrounds, they still described having the safety net of their parents to fall back on and the reassurance that provided.

Chapter 6 will explore care leavers' experiences of higher education. It will then be possible to compare the experiences of care leavers and students from other disadvantaged backgrounds and see where care leavers face deficits in *economic, social or cultural capital*.

Chapter 6

The experiences of care leavers

1 Introduction

The previous chapters have established a context for exploring care leavers' experiences of higher education. Chapters 3 and 4 considered the range and level of support currently available to care leavers from HEIs and local authorities and showed how care leaver support has developed significantly since the *Going to University from Care* study (Jackson and colleagues 2005). This should build up care leavers' levels of *economic, social and cultural capital*, making them more likely to take full advantage of the higher education experience in a similar way to their peers. However, chapters 3 and 4 also highlighted how HEIs and local authorities faced certain obstacles to the provision of support in practice. These included the reliance of HEI staff upon care leavers disclosing their care backgrounds to trigger the provision of specific care leaver support, and the potential practical difficulties for local authorities maintaining ongoing contact with care leavers. Chapter 5 discussed the experiences of a group of students from other disadvantaged backgrounds to help identify where care leavers face deficits in *capital* as a result of lacking the support of birth parents. The chapter showed that although the students from disadvantaged backgrounds often attempted to be very independent, for example, saving up to purchase the kitchen and household items required for university, their parents and families played a key role in providing them with a safety net. Parents also provided *social and cultural capital* including encouragement to aspire educationally and ongoing emotional support, which was valued by the students interviewed.

This chapter explores care leavers' experiences of higher education to see what impact support has had on their lives. Using Bourdieu's theoretical framework, the chapter considers how care leavers' *habitus* and levels of

economic, social, and cultural capital combine within the *field of higher education* to produce certain actions and decisions, which could help them, “deviate from the trajectory most common for [their social] class as a whole and follow the (higher or lower) trajectory which was most probable for members of another class” (Bourdieu 1984, p111).

2 The Data

This chapter draws on data from an internet questionnaire circulated to undergraduate students at HEIs around England and from face to face semi-structured interviews. Chapter 2 provided a detailed description of the sampling and the methods of data collection used.

The internet questionnaire was completed by 200 care leavers from 30 HEIs. Seventy-three questionnaire respondents (37%) were male and 123 (63%) female. One hundred and forty-two (71%) respondents were 18-20 years old at the start of their course. Fifty-eight respondents (29%) were 21 years or older and would therefore be classified as mature students by their HEIs. One hundred and ninety-two (96%) of the care leavers who completed the questionnaire were taking full-time courses. Thirty-five (17%) respondents reported having disclosed their care backgrounds to their HEIs and 165 (83%) had not disclosed or did not know if they had. Table 6.2.1 below shows the breakdown of questionnaire respondents by type of HEI.

Table 6.2.1

Number of questionnaire respondents by type of HEI

Type of HEI	No. of questionnaire respondents
Russell Group HEI	23 (11%)
Pre 1992 HEI	44 (22%)
Post 1992 HEI	132 (66%)
HE College	1 (<1%)

N=200

The largest number of care leavers attended post 1992 HEIs, reflecting the fact that these institutions are most numerous. Overall there is a good spread of responses by HEI type.

Face to face interviews were undertaken with 18 care leavers from HEIs around England. Three care leavers (17%) were male and 15 (83%) female, with ages ranging from 19 to 37 years. Of the care leavers interviewed, nine (50%) were mature students as they were 21 years or older at the time of starting their courses. Table 6.2.2 provides a breakdown of interview participants by type of HEI.

Table 6.2.2

Number of interview participants by type of HEI

Type of HEI	No. of interview participants
Russell Group HEI	4 (22%)
Pre 1992 HEI	5 (28%)
Post 1992 HEI	9 (50%)
HE College	0 (0%)

N=18

Once again, there is a good breakdown of interviewees by type of HEI, with the greatest proportion of care leavers coming from post 1992 HEIs.

Table 6.2.3 shows the breakdown of interview participants by type of subject studied. Social Sciences, studied by five out of the 18 care leavers (28%) was the most popular subject. This was followed by English, Design and History/Geography/Theology, which were each being studied by two out of 18 care leavers (11%).

Table 6.2.3**Interview participant by type of subject studied**

Subject area	No. of interview participants
Social Sciences	5 (28%)
English	2 (11%)
Design	2 (11%)
History/Geography/Theology	2 (11%)
Media/Journalism	1 (5.5%)
Education	1 (5.5%)
Law	1 (5.5%)
Nursing/Healthcare	1 (5.5%)
Languages/International Studies	1 (5.5%)
Performing Arts	1 (5.5%)
Environment	1 (5.5%)

N=18

The range of subjects studied had an Art and Humanities focus rather than Maths and Sciences, which is likely to reflect the fact that 83% (15/18) of the sample were female and the differences found in the subjects studied at university based on gender (OECD 2011). It is also possible that the proportion of the sample studying Social Sciences, including Social Work may reflect a wish by individuals who have been through the care system to help others. However, the fact that Social Sciences was also the most popular subject studied amongst the students from disadvantaged backgrounds suggests that their interest in the subject as sociologists led them to participate.

3 Overall levels of support

The care leavers completing the internet questionnaire were asked whether they thought overall, they had been given enough support by their HEIs. Table 6.3.1 shows their responses, which are divided into those care leavers who had disclosed their care backgrounds to their HEIs and those who had not, or did not know. The responses for the two groups are reported separately as it was hypothesised that those students having disclosed a care background would have higher levels of satisfaction as they were more likely to have accessed discrete support provision. The table shows that 41% (68/165) of care leavers who had not disclosed their backgrounds to their HEIs felt they had been given enough support. By comparison, 51% (18/35) of care leavers who had disclosed to their HEIs felt they had been given enough support. The percentage of care leavers wanting 'a bit', or 'a lot more' support were almost identical whether or not individuals had disclosed their care backgrounds. Nine percent of care leavers who had not disclosed their backgrounds (15/165) reported not having needed any support compared with three percent (1/35) of those who had disclosed.

Table 6.3.1**Overall have you been given enough support by your HEI?**

Responses	No. of care leavers	
	Who had disclosed their care background	Who had not, or did not know if they had disclosed their care background
Yes I have been given enough support	18 (51%)	68 (41%)
I would prefer a bit more support	11 (31%)	52 (32%)
I would prefer a lot more support	3 (9%)	16 (10%)
I need support, but am not being given any	0 (0%)	2 (1%)
I haven't needed any support	1 (3%)	15 (9%)
I don't know	1 (3%)	10 (6%)
No answer	1 (3%)	2 (1%)
Number of care leavers	35 (100%)	165 (100%)

N=200

4 Buttle Trust Quality Mark

Care leavers completing the internet questionnaire were asked about their awareness of the Buttle UK Quality Mark and their responses are shown in Table 6.4.1. Fourteen out of 200 care leavers (7%) had heard of the Buttle UK Quality Mark and knew why it was awarded. A further 20 care leavers (10%) had heard of the Quality Mark, but did not know why it was awarded. 165 (82%) had not heard of it and one care leaver did not answer the question.

Table 6.4.1

Care leavers' awareness of the Buttle UK Quality Mark

Level of awareness	No. of care leavers
Heard of it and aware why it is awarded	14 (7%)
Heard of it but do not know why it is awarded	20 (10%)
Never heard of it	165 (82%)
No answer	1 (1%)

N=200

Although the percentage of care leavers who had heard of the Buttle UK Quality Mark was fairly low, acknowledgment should be given to the fact that the Quality Mark was only introduced in 2006. In order to achieve the award, HEIs needed to demonstrate their commitment by putting a range of support and monitoring measures in place. Chapter 3 showed that HEIs were at differing stages in developing this care leaver provision and few had taken steps to publicise it at that stage. As the internet questionnaire was circulated to care leavers in 2009, the timing means that it is unlikely that students would have seen much, if any, publicity. If the questionnaire was repeated today, one would expect the response to be different and it would give a fairer representation of carer leavers' levels of recognition and understanding of the Quality Mark.

5 Financial issues (economic capital)

Chapter 5 discussed the costs involved in entering higher education and the potential implications for students from poorer backgrounds. Students lacking in *economic capital* may choose to study at their home institutions to save on accommodation costs, or take on part-time employment at the risk of their academic studies (Pennell and West 2005). Chapters 3 and 4 also highlighted the variation in the levels of financial support provided by HEIs and local authorities to students from care backgrounds.

Overall levels of economic capital

All of the students interviewed had tuition fee and maintenance loans. The majority reported receiving a means tested bursary and a number also reported receiving care leaver bursaries from their HEIs. Overall, those care leavers who received a combination of financial support through student loans, money from their local authority and finance from their HEI in the form of care leaver and other income related bursaries, felt they were coping financially. Because local authorities and HEIs made lump sum or termly payments to care leavers to meet their living costs, they were potentially cash rich in comparison with their peers.

“One of my best friends from my course, she didn't really get any funding because of her parents' income and we'd have arguments about it, and she'd be like, 'I don't get a student loan and ra..ra..ra...' and I'd say, 'Yeah but if you see a pair of trainers you like, you can phone your mum up and she'll buy them for you. Who do I phone up to ask to buy me trainers? No one. I have to buy them myself.’” (Ruth, aged 33, post 1992 HEI)

Experiences such as Ruth's highlight how care leavers may be cash rich, but need to make that pot of money cover all eventualities. Unlike their peers, care leavers may not have the financial safety net of parents or family to fall back on.

There were mixed experiences of financial support from local authorities. Some care leavers were very happy with the levels of financial support they received and had experienced no difficulties accessing it in practice. For instance, Susan received a generous financial package from both her university and local authority. Instead of reducing their contribution to reflect the fact that costs were being met by the university, her local authority continued to pay the same amount and advised her to save the excess. Other care leavers were less fortunate. Sara was initially given inaccurate

information about the financial support she would receive. Her support had also gradually diminished since she had begun her studies as the authority had become increasingly unwilling to reimburse her for items such as course texts and materials, which she had been told would be covered.

“By the end of the first year... it's... I've had to push [my personal adviser] more for the money. Now it's the second year, well last year, the second year, where I didn't actually get reimbursed until... like the very end of the academic year for stuff like [travelling to university] in September and books that I'd ordered and stuff.” (Sara, aged 20, post 1992 HEI)

Anna had been trying to secure the financial support promised to her by the local authority for many months, including payment of accommodation costs. She had been fortunate in having an extremely helpful and pro-active named contact for care leavers at her HEI who was also trying to engage with the local authority on her behalf.

“[My named contact at university] has tried desperately to get in touch with [my social worker] and speak to her properly but erm... [My named contact] is always very open about what responses she gets back and what she says erm... with me, so erm... She only ever gets one sentence replies back like I do from my social worker.” (Anna, aged 20, post 1992 HEI)

The majority of care leavers interviewed did not receive any financial support from their birth families, although one care leaver described receiving financial support from a grandparent.

“To be honest my gran started helping me out in my second year at uni. I moved in with a fella... it didn't work out. I think they wanted me to continue with uni because I was doing alright.” (Zoe, aged 29, pre 1992 HEI)

These experiences show that whilst care leavers are experiencing *economic capital* as an asset from local authorities, HEIs and occasionally family, some are also experiencing deficits. This reflects the variation in the levels of support provided by local authorities and HEIs discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. It is likely that given the funding issues faced by local authorities and HEIs, it will become more difficult to provide care leavers with the levels of *economic capital* that social care and student support professionals would like to give. The remainder of this section looks at some of the issues faced by the care leavers interviewed, which potentially influence how acutely they experience deficits in their *economic capital*.

The structure of financial support

There appeared to be a degree of confusion amongst some of the care leavers interviewed about the different sources of funding available in higher education.

“Int: So did you get a loan for tuition fees?”

CL: Not really sure if it's a loan.. probably some of the loan. I think that it's the loan... do you know... if it's general living whereas the tuition fees are... it's like a loan. I don't know.. er.. but I had that all together, so I just kind of, I didn't really designate one loan for one thing.” (Marie, aged 18, pre 1992 HEI)

One care leaver discovered he was eligible for a bursary, but had no idea on what basis it was being paid.

“CL: So I've... I phoned up um... I said, 'You must have this wrong. I haven't applied for anything' um...tick, tick, tick..... I'd hear the woman on the computer, 'No, no, it's definitely right. You've got a bursary'”

Int: Do you know what the criteria were that you... you got it for?

CL: No, I haven't got the foggiest." (Will, aged 36, post 1992 HEI)

Mitton (2007) described the situation as unsatisfactory and highlights how difficult it is for a young person considering university to definitively establish the level of financial support to which they are entitled. Although students supported by their birth parents have to negotiate the system of loans and bursaries, they are likely to know the extent of the *economic capital* their parents are able to provide and be able to access that funding easily. In addition to understanding the system of higher education funding, care leavers have to negotiate their local authority's funding package. In some authorities, that package may be transparent, with staff trying to ensure that care leavers understand the extent of the funding available to them. An attempt to do this was discussed in Chapter 4 where one authority had developed a written checklist to be used when discussing the costs of university with individual care leavers. However, where this is not the case, it is likely to be more difficult for a care leaver than other students to secure details of their financial support because they are extracting information from a large bureaucratic organisation rather than their parents.

Although some of the students from disadvantaged backgrounds in Chapter 5 described confusion at the different loan and bursary payments they received, this confusion has additional implications for care leavers. If students are unclear about when or what is being paid to them, planning and budgeting become difficult. To a student with the safety net of birth parents, failing to budget accurately is likely to be an inconvenience. To a care leaver, the consequence of knowing there is no financial safety net is likely to be increased caution, which in itself, may be considered an asset. However, if part of being an undergraduate is about working out your identity as an emerging adult, fear of slightly overspending or failing to budget accurately could inhibit an individual's freedom to participate fully in student life, to the extent that it hinders their ability to build *social and cultural capital* in the same way as their peers. The fact that care leavers do not have parents to top up their money when it runs out was identified by Jackson and colleagues

(2005), as one of the key differences between these young people and other students.

As with the disadvantaged students interviewed, the majority of care leavers found the current system of instalments worked adequately, although there was a suggestion that instalments should be better spread to cover the summer vacation period. This was a particular issue for care leavers who had to pay rent over the summer months.

Pressures on economic capital

The individuals who reported struggling most financially were those care leavers who entered higher education with existing debts, those with dependents, or older care leavers who were ineligible for local authority support. Will described having worked during term to afford his rent and living costs.

“I have a certain amount of debt yeah, which I have... you know, which some of the student grant is helping me with... helping me get rid of that, which is extremely unfortunate. I'm kicking myself very hard, but er yeah... I've made mistakes and I'm paying for it now. So maybe if I didn't have that debt I might be ok.” (Will, aged 36, post 1992)

The pressures faced by mature students or those with children are not exclusive to care leavers. Bowl (2001)'s study of mature students found that lack of money was the most pressing issue. However, the absence of family support is likely to compound issues such as childcare difficulties. At the time of interview, one care leaver had just agreed with her university to take a year out of her studies due to the difficulties of meeting the expense of childcare and running a household on a student income. Although this could be an issue for any student with a young family, the fact that this care leaver had no *social capital* in the form of family to rely on made it particularly difficult.

Pre-existing debt is an issue identified by some care leavers interviewed which they link to their experiences of leaving care. Ruth described how she got into debt when she moved into semi independent accommodation at seventeen.

“...you don’t have any concept of paying bills and what bills have to be paid.....And I wasn’t prepared for any of that so I’m still living with the consequences of that.” (Ruth, aged 33, post 1992 HEI)

Research has previously identified inconsistencies in the level of preparation young people receive for leaving care and it is recognised that care leavers also tend to make the transition to independence at a much younger age than their peers (Dixon and colleagues 2006; Wade and Dixon 2006). Although some of care leavers interviewed in this study remained living with carers until they started university, others described having lived on their own from the age of 16 or 17 with varying levels of preparation. Zoe described her experience of being 'evicted' from care aged 16.

“I went into like adult hostels. I must have been in and out of various hostels around the city for about a year.” (Zoe, aged 29, pre 1992 HEI)

The culmination of moving into independent accommodation at a young age without being sufficiently prepared for paying bills and running a household makes the likelihood of building up debt almost inevitable. Once in higher education, servicing a debt can make the difference between coping financially and financial hardship and is not conducive to studying and participating fully in student life. Care leavers in situations like this are, therefore, in need of additional *economic capital* if they are not to be disadvantaged.

Nearly all of the care leavers interviewed had some form of paid employment throughout term time, although it was not permitted at certain HEIs. Many also worked throughout the vacation periods. The hours worked by care leavers

ranged from two and a half hours a week to full-time, which would have had an impact on a student's capacity to study (Metcalf 2003).

“I've cut my full-time hours down to 30 hours a week, which is still way too many. I should really not be working at all to get through the workload and achieve as high as I can.” (Will, aged 36, post 1992 HEI)

Although Will acknowledged part-time employment affected his ability to study, he had no other means of paying his rent and bills.

The pressure on care leavers to find employment during term time reflects the situation of many of the disadvantaged students discussed in Chapter 5. Students from more advantaged backgrounds possessing higher levels of *economic capital* are likely to be in a better position than care leavers and other disadvantaged students to focus on their studies and make the most of the higher education experience.

Maturity in managing available economic capital

Three of the care leavers interviewed described instances of squandering some of their funding as they were unused to having so much money available.

“I'd never had £2000 in my bank account before and all of a sudden you've got £2000 in your bank account whoo hoo!!” (Ruth, aged 33, post 1992 HEI)

This suggests that the concerns expressed by local authority staff in Chapter 4 about paying large sums of money to care leavers and the temptation of easy credit in the form of student loans may have been valid. However, despite having little experience of possessing high levels of *economic capital*, the interviews revealed an overall mature approach to dealing with finance amongst care leavers. As discussed above, nearly all worked part-time and

through holiday periods, describing budgeting and being financially aware in a way that their peers may have found alien.

“I mean another main thing that I... I have always wanted to do was make sure that my credit rating's good because obviously from a young age being in care I understood what credit rating was, whereas now people at uni don't even understand that you've got to build up a credit rating at some point in your life.” (Kezia, post 1992 HEI)

This may provide one explanation as to why this group of young people have successfully reached higher education despite the odds. Their ability to use the *economic capital* they possess wisely may be compensating for deficits in the level of that *capital*.

Such financial maturity is also likely to be a consequence of having a compressed and accelerated transition to independence. If Kezia had been living at home with a supportive birth family, at the age of 19, one would expect her to be taking her first steps towards independence and still to be very much reliant upon her parents. However, as a 19 year old care leaver, Kezia had lived on her own from the age of 16. She had already had to assume independence, running her own household and exhibiting a level of maturity one might expect of someone older. In terms of *capital*, although her compressed and accelerated transition may have deprived her of acquiring the *social and cultural capital* that most young people build up as their parents prepare them to leave home, her experiences have provided her with a compensatory form of *cultural capital* in the form of financial maturity. Adapting to deficits in *capital* in this way may offer one explanation as to how care leavers manage to deviate from the trajectory indicated by their social group to reach higher education (Bourdieu 1984).

6 Non financial issues (social and cultural capital)

In addition to issues relating to the levels of *economic capital* available to care leavers, Jackson and colleagues (2005) identified a number of non financial issues facing care leavers in higher education, which potentially place them at a disadvantage when compared with their peers. These are circumstances where, unlike their more privileged peers, care leavers may not possess, or be in a position to build up their levels of *social and cultural capital*. How care leavers cope in these unfamiliar situations depends upon the combination of their *habitus*, formed through previous experiences and the *capital* available to them at that time (Bourdieu 1984).

The remainder of this chapter considers the impact of various aspects of non financial support on care leavers' experiences of higher education. The chapter identifies where the care leavers interviewed in this study have experienced deficits in *social and cultural capital* and where student support provision has helped them to overcome these deficits.

The route into higher education

Although some of the care leavers interviewed moved directly from school or college to university, nearly all described experiences which disrupted their pathways through education. In some instances, these experiences resulted in young people discontinuing their education for several years.

"It took me about 10 years from going [into schools] as a volunteer to become a qualified teacher... yeah, I did it a really long way round."
(Hayley, aged 37, post 1992 HEI)

Hayley lacked encouragement at school and dropped out to work in a number of low paid jobs. She later decided to become a teacher and applied to do an Access Course, a qualification designed for individuals who want to enter higher education, but do not possess the necessary qualifications from school.

Other care leavers did not experience such long periods of time between leaving school and entering higher education. However, even where there was not a sizeable overall delay in care leavers' entry to university, young people described having taken very difficult routes compared with the normative experiences of undergraduates. One care leaver had been excluded from school and had to fight to be allowed to continue with GCSEs.

“So I did turn round to [the local education authority] and said, ‘Look, I want education’ and they said, ‘Well we can’t get you into another school because you’ve been fully excluded.’ So, anyway, I carried on pushing it and pushing it and pushing it.” (Kezia, aged 19, post 1992 HEI)

Kezia’s determination to gain an education came from seeing other children in her residential home doing nothing with their lives.

Care leavers described a range of very difficult experiences encountered on their journeys into higher education, including unsupportive carers and teachers, domestic abuse, lacking support to deal with the long term impact of childhood events, low paid employment, criminal convictions and single parenthood. One care leaver described the reasons behind his decision to leave school, which led to him working until he returned to education aged 25.

“A friend of mine was like, ‘Well you do realise that if you get a full time job that you could get your own flat.’ So that was just like.. at 16, just turned 16, I thought, ‘Oh, this is superb. So I’ll do that and as I really wasn’t getting on well with my foster parents either because they were from a really very low income background and they were doing it purely for the money.’”(James, aged 27, Russell Group HEI)

Although the routes into higher education taken by many care leavers in the sample were difficult or extended compared with the normative experiences of young people, there were care leavers who described moving directly from

school to university and felt they had been supported educationally by those around them including their carers, birth families and local authorities.

“My foster parents were fantastic, yeah, I couldn’t slate them for anything.” (Elliot, aged 28, post 1992 HEI)

The circuitous and difficult routes into higher education taken by many of the care leavers highlight their lack of *cultural and social capital*. Although not impossible, the circumstances described are less likely to be experienced by young people who have a strong support network of family and friends, or who have been encouraged to aspire and expect success. The adversity encountered by care leavers on the route into higher education also emphasises how far this particular group of students have managed to deviate from the life course trajectory expected of individuals from similar backgrounds.

Chapter 5 found that the routes taken by disadvantaged students into higher education resembled those of ‘traditional’ students. However, the interviews with care leavers suggest that their routes into higher education are much more difficult and can also be far longer as a result of deficits in *capital* such as lack of support to achieve educationally.

Supportive relationships in the period leading up to higher education

The importance of supportive relationships in the period leading up to higher education is recognised in the new guidance to the Children Act 1989, which makes recommendations designed to ensure that local authorities and carers play their part in helping young people make informed decisions about higher education, and that the application process is very much a joint venture between young people and those involved in their care (Department for Education 2010a). Strong relationships with carers, teachers and other professionals will provide care leavers with *social capital* they can draw upon to help them navigate these experiences successfully and which would normally be provided in part by birth parents.

“I applied to other unis... however, however many you’re supposed to do and got accepted to them all, but they were like quite below my ability. ... My foster mum told me to cancel them all. So I cancelled them all and just applied to [my preferred university].” (Verity, aged 20, pre 1992 HEI)

By suggesting Verity change her choice of HEI, her foster mother was using her own understanding of higher education to encourage her foster daughter to aspire. This is an example of *cultural capital* in operation and reflects the type of advice expected from the parents of ‘traditional’ students. The more care leavers are able to draw upon the advice and support of others, the more likely they are to make the right decisions about courses and institutions, avoiding problems further down the line.

Those care leavers who have been well supported in the period leading up to higher education are more likely to possess levels of *economic, social and cultural capital* comparable to their peers. Encouraging care leavers to aspire and to expect success will also have a positive influence upon their *habitus*. These factors will in turn increase care leavers’ chances of having a normative undergraduate experience.

However, in light of what we know about the experiences of care leavers from Jackson and colleagues (2005), one would expect care leavers currently entering higher education to be less prepared and equipped with *capital* than their peers. The following paragraphs explore care leavers’ experiences in greater detail to establish whether this was the case for the students participating in this study.

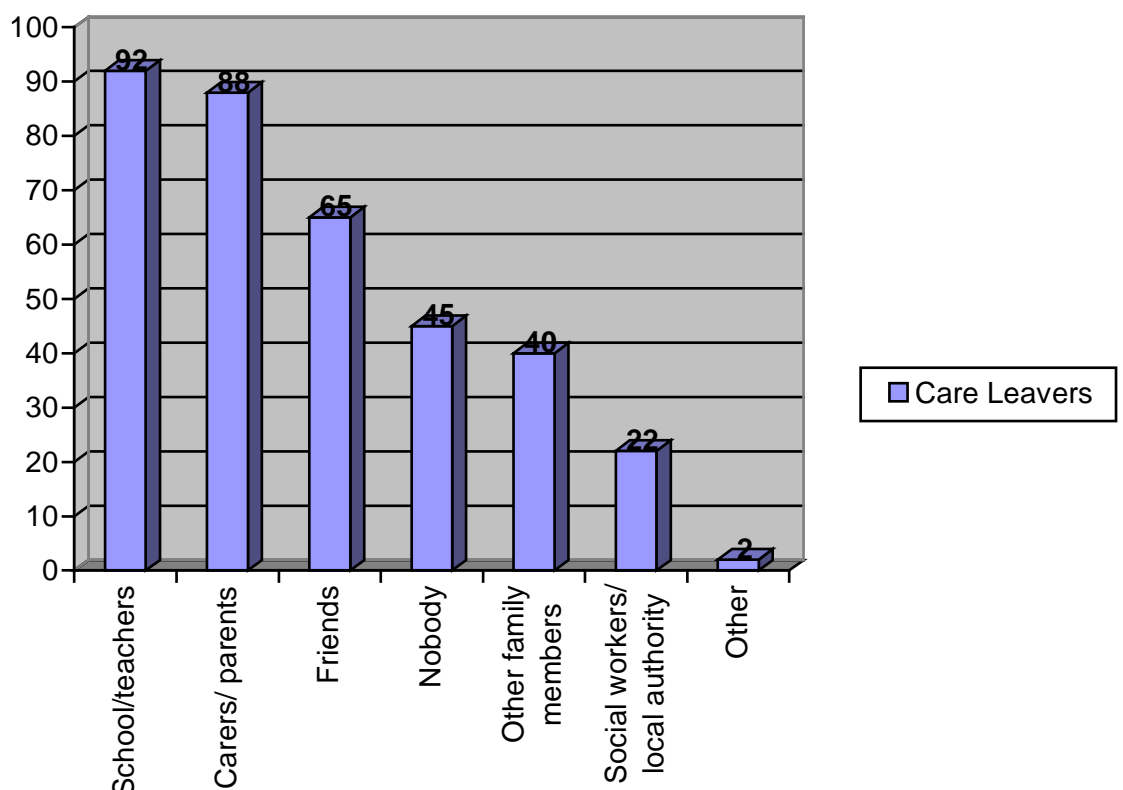
Encouragement to achieve educationally

As part of the internet questionnaire, care leavers were asked who had encouraged them to enter higher education. Figure 6.6.1 illustrates their responses. Care leavers were able to select multiple answers reflecting the

fact that support may have come from a number of sources. School or teachers was the most common response with 92 out of 200 care leavers (46%) identifying them as a source of encouragement. This was followed by carers or parents identified by 88 care leavers (44%). Sixty-five care leavers referred to their friends (33%), 45 care leavers (23%) received encouragement from nobody, 40 (20%) were encouraged by other family members, 22 (11%) identified their social workers or local authorities as a source of encouragement and two (1%) had other sources of encouragement.

Figure 6.6.1

Sources of encouragement to enter higher education



The relatively low number of care leavers who identified their social workers or local authorities as a source of encouragement to enter higher education reflects the findings of a study by Harker and colleagues (2003). The study asked 80 looked after children between the ages of 10 and 18 who supported

their educational progress. Five percent (4/80) identified social workers as a source of support whilst 51% (41/80) referred to their teachers. Chapter 4 found that the local authorities in the current sample were developing support packages for care leavers in higher education. However, Figure 6.6.1 suggests that the role of encouraging young people to consider higher education as an option is falling to teachers and carers, who have day to day contact with care leavers. If this is the case, it is a further example of the importance of trusting relationships in the provision of *social and cultural capital* and how particular agencies or individuals are the most appropriately placed to provide this. The level of contact between carers or teachers and care leavers provides a suitable environment to develop a trusting relationship where encouragement and advice can be given.

The 18 care leavers interviewed in the course of this study also had very diverse experiences of being encouraged to achieve educationally. One care leaver described the positive impact of support from her college tutors.

“[My tutors] made me think I can do this... give me a boost to... I think if you've got a good teacher it really does... you feel more confident, to give me the confidence to think this is alright. I'm capable of [going to university].” (Zoe, aged 29, pre 1992 HEI)

One care leaver attended a school where there was an ethos of high aspiration.

“The college that I was in is a really, really good college in [name of the city], so I was around a lot of people that were going for the sort of Oxbridge interviews.” (Sara, aged 20, post 1992 HEI)

She had also remained in one stable foster placement and had a carer who instilled the importance of education in her.

Another care leaver was encouraged educationally by his birth mother, even though circumstances eventually led to her no longer being able to care for

him. Although care leavers referred to receiving support from their birth parents, this appears to have been predominantly provided once they were at university and not during the period leading up to it. This is possibly because birth parents had no experience or understanding of higher education themselves, so felt unable to provide support. However, the parents of disadvantaged students in Chapter 5 who did not have personal experience of higher education still managed to provide encouragement and emotional support. A further possibility is that relationships with birth parents were only rebuilt once care leavers had reached university, although it is impossible to establish this from the current data.

A number of care leavers described receiving little or no encouragement from carers or their schools. In some cases, this led to individuals leaving school early, and taking the circuitous routes into higher education discussed earlier in this chapter. For example, James left school at sixteen to work before being inspired to return after hearing colleagues' experiences of university.

"I was sort of speaking to [colleagues]. They were just talking about all the opportunities that they've had from going to university and meeting different people and then travelling and, you know, doing this and that and I just thought, you know, I just... yeah... it sounds brilliant, it sounds great, let me do it and I actually looked myself.... then, just online." (James, aged 27, Russell Group HEI)

Leah described how she was actively discouraged from remaining at school.

".....they [the school] said I was bringing their attendance levels down so they just asked me to leave basically, didn't put the effort into helping me stay." (Leah, aged 25, post 1992 HEI)

These care leavers were fortunate in that despite lacking the support and encouragement to succeed academically whilst in care, at some point they acquired sufficient *social, cultural and economic capital* to resume their education as young adults. For example, they possessed adequate

determination, a support network or the financial means to return to education. Leah was encouraged to apply to university by a member of her birth family after a period of working in basic level jobs. She also described wanting to help others.

“I was interested in literature and things like that, but I always wanted to do something like social work or community work because I got into trouble when I was younger.” (Leah, aged 25, post 1992 HEI)

It is not possible to conclude from the data in this study how many care leavers leave education prematurely and subsequently never acquire the necessary *capital* to return to their studies.

The encouragement care leavers received from their carers varied greatly amongst those interviewed. Sara described receiving constant encouragement from her carer.

“The home support like [my carer] saying... ‘You know, this is the next step. If you want to go to these unis, then best thing is to go and have a look at them...’” (Sara, aged 20, post 1992 HEI)

Carers such as Sara’s help care leavers to increase their levels of *cultural capital* by teaching them the value of education and aspiration. By being part of a support network, carers also act as a source of *social capital* that students can turn to when necessary. This mirrors the role of birth parents described by disadvantaged students in Chapter 5.

In other cases, no encouragement was given at all by carers. Asked whether he was encouraged educationally whilst living in residential care, Will said,

“Mm, I would say no, not really um...to be quite honest children’s homes can be quite, quite hectic places as erm any social care environment..... I don’t think I was particularly pushed positively to do anything related to my schooling” (Will, aged 36, post 1992 HEI)

Compared with the family environment provided by foster carers, residential care is generally perceived as a second best option. Research has identified particularly poor outcomes amongst young people in residential care including self-harm and an increased likelihood of criminal offending, although young people have also expressed positive views about their experiences. As a result, in recent years the number of residential placements has levelled off whilst the number of foster placements has risen (Berridge and colleagues 2011; 2012).

The significant role of carers in promoting the educational achievement of young people is highlighted by the experience of Hayley. She was keen to study for a social care course at college, but was prevented from doing so as the college felt it was inappropriate given her care background. As a result, she dropped out and found unskilled employment. She believed that this decision would not have gone unchallenged by a concerned parent.

“.... looking back on it somebody from care should have kicked off and put their foot down and said that’s not right.” (Hayley, aged 37, post 1992 HEI)

As a consequence of the lack of action by those responsible for her care, Hayley was deprived of acquiring valuable *cultural capital* in the form of a social care qualification. Like James and Leah, Hayley was fortunate in that she managed to overcome a lack of support and encouragement and eventually entered higher education as a mature student. It is likely that others were not so fortunate.

The care leavers interviewed in the course of this study made little reference to social workers in discussing who encouraged their education, reflecting the findings of the internet survey. Wade and Munro (2008) suggest that although leaving care services have been effective in supporting young people across some aspects of their lives, they have been less effective in relation to education. As one care leaver commented,

“So [my social worker] was more just like pushing the family relationships more than the educational relationship.” (Zoe, aged 29, pre 1992 HEI)

The overall lack of support and encouragement experienced by some of the care leavers in the current sample again reflects the findings of Harker and colleagues (2003). They found that that 22% (18/80) of the young people in their sample were unable to identify one instance of someone supporting them educationally. Growing up without having the value of education instilled within them or being encouraged to achieve deprives young people of one way of building their levels of *capital*. It also negatively impacts their *habitus* by leaving them with little sense of expectation or confidence in their own abilities. Once these ideas are formed, they continue to influence a person’s decisions and actions.

The data collected in this study therefore shows that whilst some of the care leavers interviewed experienced supportive and encouraging relationships with those around them, positively impacting their *habitus* and helping them build *social and cultural capital*, the negative experiences of others left them with deficits in *capital*.

The importance of extra curricular activity

The interviews with disadvantaged students identified a perceived need to refer to extra curricular activities in the UCAS application to enhance it, particularly for courses where all applicants were expected to achieve the required grades. Being able to include evidence of extra curricular activities such as sport, or relevant work experience was equally of concern to care leavers. One care leaver was able to refer to her involvement in a play being performed by looked after children.

“... so that was kind of one thing as well I had on my side... that I could add to [my UCAS form]. I was like, ‘This is what I’m involved in.’”
(Alison, aged 20, post 1992 HEI)

Traditionally, parents use the *economic, social and cultural capital* at their disposal to ensure their children have the best start in life (Berridge 2007). An example of parents using their available *capital* for the benefit of their children can be seen where parents use their own *social capital* to secure work experience through friends or professional contacts. The imbalance of a system where children of the most well connected and affluent parents secure work experience or internships has been the recent subject of political debate (Lawton and Potter 2010). However, local authorities, as major employers and providers of local services are ideally placed to offer care leavers and looked after children access to leisure activities, work experience, apprenticeships and training opportunities (Department for Education and Skills 2007). Moreover, evidence from the interviews with local authorities suggests that this is occurring in some areas of the country where young people are being encouraged to develop interests and pursue their talents as part of attempts to raise aspirations and improve outcomes.

Support completing the UCAS application

As discussed in Chapter 5, competition for university places can be fierce, so receiving adequate support to complete the UCAS application form is important. The choice of course and institution may also have consequences for years to come. With so much resting upon this single application, parents usually play a key role in helping their children present themselves in the best possible light. This is a situation where care leavers potentially have a deficit in *social capital*, as they are unlikely to have birth parents or family members to whom they can turn for support. In these circumstances, care leavers will be reliant upon the support of their carers, teachers or social workers to reduce that deficit.

Some of the care leavers interviewed described having had very normative experiences of completing the UCAS form with the assistance of tutors, carers or friends.

“[My Access Course tutors] were brilliant. We actually had lectures on it. We took the forms in, they helped us fill it in... our letter of application. They read through it, they crossed off the bits that they didn't think were any good, so yes.” (Hayley, aged 37, post 1992 HEI)

Care leavers described receiving support from their schools as one would expect, either on a one to one basis or in dedicated lessons on completing the application process. In this regard, they appeared no worse off than the other students from disadvantaged backgrounds interviewed.

Some care leavers described receiving valuable help from their carers, family and friends, and in a small number of instances, social workers or personal advisers. One care leaver had a very pro-active leaving care worker helping her, which she thought was very important,

“.....'cause otherwise I probably would've, would've missed out and not applied.” (Susan, aged 20, pre 1992 HEI)

The care leavers interviewed described being more likely to turn to their teachers for assistance as they saw it as part of their remit rather than that of their social worker or leaving care worker.

However, if carers were unwilling, or felt unable to assist because they had no experience of higher education, care leavers could be left at a disadvantage. One care leaver described finding support from alternative sources as he had no ongoing contact with his carers and was not in college at the point of application.

“I got [advice filling in the UCAS form] off a work colleague who'd just been to university. [.....] She was quite up to date with all the UCAS

forms and stuff like that because they were quite daunting.” (James, aged 27, Russell Group HEI)

This differentiates care leavers from other disadvantaged students because once they have left the care system they are unlikely to have the ongoing support of carers. Mature students from disadvantaged backgrounds are still likely to be able to turn to their parents for support, regardless of age.

A potential weakness highlighted by the interviews with care leavers was that there appeared to be no single adult figure with clear overall responsibility for overseeing the UCAS application in the same way a birth parent would. In policy terms, the recent introduction of designated teachers and virtual heads may address this issue by providing a central figure with responsibility for the education of care leavers (s20 Children and Young Persons Act 2008). Participants in the current study, however, attended school prior to this development so would not have benefited. The guidance to the Children Act 1989 states that young people and carers should be provided with all the information they need to complete the application, but it does not identify who within the local authority structure should ultimately be responsible for doing this (Department for Education 2010a). These developments may therefore help to bring the level of support for future care leavers closer to that received by both disadvantaged and traditional students who have the support of parents.

Disclosing a care background

Chapter 3 discussed the reluctance of some care leavers to disclose their care backgrounds. Disclosure is critical as it unlocks the door to discrete support available from HEIs, which would enable care leavers to build up their levels of *capital*. Without disclosure, HEI staff are unable to identify those amongst the student population eligible for care leaver support. A tendency towards self reliance amongst care leavers developed in response to experiences from earlier in their lives may also result in students failing to

seek out valuable support. It is therefore important that care leavers understand the benefits and implications of disclosure.

Most of the care leavers interviewed were unsure whether or not they had disclosed their backgrounds to their HEIs during the application process. It should be noted that the UCAS tick box for care leavers was introduced after some of those interviewed applied to higher education. Individuals' memories were also sometimes uncertain so long after the event. A number believed they had disclosed in the funding application forms as they were unable to give details of parental income or had to provide evidence of estrangement. However, this would only constitute narrow disclosure in relation to funding. Because of confidentiality, the relevant staff within student support would not necessarily be informed.

Kerry described being unsure about disclosure when applying to university as she was afraid of being singled out. She also did not understand the implications of ticking the disclosure box on the UCAS form.

"Ticking that.... 'cause I don't, I don't wanna be singled out. I didn't want to be. I'm not..... it wouldn't bother me now like, erm, but at the time I didn't want to be.... so I just..... 'cause the whole uni experience at beginning for me was really scary. I didn't know nobody, 'cause I.... I have issues with erm secu-, security, feeling secure." (Kerry, aged 24, post 1992 HEI)

Zoe did not feel there was need to disclose her background,

"Int: Do you think there is any benefit in telling the university? If there was some funding, would you mind telling them you come from a care background?

CL: No, it's part of my past isn't it? No, because I think I've always been very independent. I suppose I was... I suppose it's

ingrained in me. I just get up and get on.” (Zoe, aged 29, pre 1992 HEI)

McMurray and colleagues (2011) found that young people tried to distance themselves from their care backgrounds to avoid standing out from others. Consequently, having systems in place to provide a clear explanation of who would receive disclosure information and what they would do with it, may provide some reassurance to a care leaver that their background will not become common knowledge.

One of the mature care leavers had chosen not to disclose his background.

“I haven’t felt the need to divulge that. I mean, they don’t need to know that do they? Yeah... I’m certainly not one to look for... well, I don’t want sympathy or anything [.....] I suppose, you know, I’ve left that part of my life behind really.” (Will, aged 36, post 1992 HEI)

For Will, the events currently occurring in his life were what was most important to him.

Besides disclosing in the initial UCAS and funding application forms, other care leavers chose to disclose to tutors or peers once they began their courses. For the care leavers interviewed, the decision was dependent upon the particular situation they were in at that time. A care leaver on a social work course disclosed her background when a fellow student stated that looked after children did not succeed in life.

“So that’s when it... sometimes it does come out that I’m a care leaver. Sometimes it don’t, but what I don’t... I don’t want people’s sympathy. Do you know what I mean?” (Kerry, aged 24, post 1992 HEI)

James disclosed in passing to his tutor when family support was mentioned at a meeting, although nothing happened as a result of that information.

“I think I mentioned it then, that it, it’s not something that really, you know, I don’t really sort of say it to a lot of people.” (James, aged 27, Russell Group HEI)

When and where people disclose their care backgrounds ultimately rests on an individual’s personality.

“CL: some of my friends that are care leavers, they would be straight in there like, “Listen, this is... this is what I am. Is there anything you can do for me?”

Int: Yes

CL: Do you know what I mean? So it just depends, doesn’t it... Then there’s other people that don’t want to mention it to anyone.”

(Sara, aged 20, post 1992 HEI)

The uncertainty exhibited by care leavers as to whether they had disclosed and their reluctance to come forward suggests that more could be done from a policy perspective to encourage them to access support. Where individuals have not disclosed, they are missing out on an opportunity to increase their *capital* and take full advantage of the support available in the same way as their peers. There will be some care leavers who choose not to disclose even if they know about additional support because they feel they have moved on with their lives and that their backgrounds are irrelevant. For other care leavers who may benefit from additional support, the introduction of the UCAS tick box should increase disclosure. However, the interviews with care leavers highlight the lack of understanding about the implications of disclosing. There is, therefore, a need to inform and reassure care leavers as to who will have access to their information if they come forward.

Awareness of support

Chapter 3 described how the act of disclosure discussed above starts a process of making the care leaver aware of the range of support available to him or her. Yet, if a care leaver chooses not to disclose, or if the system fails in some way, it is possible they will remain unaware of the extent of support available to them. Understanding that support is available specifically to care leavers may positively influence a student's *habitus*, making them more inclined to access it. Knowing unequivocally that you are eligible for certain support should help dispel any feelings of lack of entitlement that students from less privileged backgrounds may have.

Some care leavers described very positive experiences of being made aware of the support available from both the local authority and HEI. One care leaver felt she had received the necessary information from her HEI.

CL: "I got sent a package [from my HEI] as well with all the info about what support there's available and everything like that, so I know what was available.

Int: And how useful was their approach? Did that work for you?

CL: Oh yeah, definitely." (Susan, aged 20, pre 1992 HEI)

Another thought her social worker had informed her about the support she would receive.

Int: "Did anyone sit down with you and explain [your local authority's support package?]

CL: Yeah, I think my social worker did. I think she... she was saying something about I could get a top up, like once they'd calculated all the stuff... that I could get a bit more money, and then she

also said that we can pay for books and trips.” (Sara, aged 20, post 1992 HEI)

One care leaver described being informed by her local authority what support she could expect from them, and then being contacted by student support at her university about their support package. As a result, she was having a positive experience at university and knew who she could contact if she needed help or advice. Another care leaver described how even though she had not felt the need to disclose her care background, her HEI was very proactive in alerting all students to available support.

“I think because it’s there, I’ve not... I’ve not needed to go and search for it. It’s been quite easily accessible.” (Zoe, aged 29, post 1992 HEI)

Zoe described this as being, “like a comfort blanket, the information to wrap round you”. This view mirrors that of the disadvantaged students in Chapter 5 who were not overly concerned with the specifics of support provided they knew it was available if they needed it. Being aware of the existence of support and how to access it provides care leavers with the ability to build their levels of *social, cultural and economic* capital. It is then up to the student to use those resources to improve their circumstances.

The impact of timely support information

The care leavers interviewed in the course of this study appreciated receiving information about the support they were entitled to in good time. One student explained why it was important for him to have financial matters explained before the course started.

“When you’re starting your course the only worries, you know, if you call them worries is to be doing your course. It’s the content of the course and the actual work, that’s what you’ve come to university to do. All the rest is just superficial and it should, you know, really should be sorted out before you turn up, you know, even if it’s.... I mean I know

that's maybe before Freshers' Week even or something." (James, aged 27, Russell Group HEI)

Building on this idea, Kezia thought that more looked after children would consider higher education as an option if they knew in advance what support they could expect from their local authorities. She only found out two months before she began her course that she would have a Pathway Worker supporting her throughout university.

"I thought that the minute I turned 18, erm... just started uni, that that'd be it, then I wouldn't.... I wouldn't get any support at all." (Kezia, aged 19, post 1992 HEI)

A care leaver's *habitus* is likely to mean they have minimal expectation of receiving support and deter them from considering higher education as an option. Informing care leavers as early as possible about the available support should, therefore, increase their expectations and the likelihood of making the positive decision to enter higher education.

The previous chapter described forms of parental support which students traditionally receive, including regular financial allowances and one off payments, or a home base to which students can return for practical support (Christie and colleagues 2001; Christie 2005). Birth parents of young people considering university would not choose to keep their children in the dark about how they are going to be supported through higher education. Ensuring they understand what resources they will have forms part of the process of preparation for leaving home and by removing uncertainty will help to make the transition into a new environment, the *field of higher education*, smoother. Such preparation could be of greatest benefit to care leavers who, as some of the most disadvantaged students, may find it most difficult to adjust to the higher education environment.

Gaining access to support

Once care leavers have been made aware of support, just as with the disadvantaged students in the previous chapter, barriers may still remain which prevent or deter students from actually accessing it. Students need to be able to access support discreetly so they are not discouraged from seeking the help which could increase their *capital* and help them deviate from the trajectory expected of those from their social background. One care leaver described how it was possible to discreetly look at posters advertising support for care leavers.

“You can just pretend you’re looking... at some other posters. You don’t have to look directly at a poster. You can pretend to look at the next one and then just do it... just go, you know.” (Kerry, aged 24, post 1992 HEI)

The internet questionnaire to HEIs revealed that many operate a one stop shop approach to accessing support, for example involving a helpdesk providing a visible access point for information on student support.

“[The student support centre is] a massive area with an open front, which is fine for most little things, if I need special support, I need this, I need that. However, if you’ve got an emotional problem mmm.... Not the best resource really.” (Elliot, aged 28, post 1992 HEI)

The open plan layout was seen by some care leavers as off putting for anyone wishing to speak to staff about something personal, or for someone seeking to access specific care leaver support. Named contacts provide one solution to accessing support as care leavers can then ask for an appointment without having to explain their background to the person staffing the desk. This is a significant difference between the experiences of care leavers and disadvantaged students. Although students from disadvantaged backgrounds may have issues which they want to deal with discreetly, they do not have to

deal with the stigma attached to being in care and the assumptions which others can make.

One of the mature students described his anxiety about accessing support.

“I haven’t actually used [study skills support]. I’m too scared um... to actually use them. I have bit a.... I have issues with people thinking that I’m not up to it, you know. It’s a bit silly, you know... and of course they’re gonna be nothing but fine. I know this, but yeah, yeah, I do worry about that, very much.” (Will, aged 36, post 1992 HEI)

Persuading mature students in particular to access services may require some additional reassurance if they feel they may be judged negatively by staff as being unable to cope.

Where staff in one part of the student support department recommend that a care leaver might benefit from the services of another section of student support, those interviewed generally wanted that staff member to help them make that initial contact, rather than just directing them to the appropriate person or office. This highlights the reliance placed on those with whom a care leaver has developed a relationship of trust. This is important as a care leaver, unfamiliar with the university environment and whose *habitus* once again means they are not accustomed to expecting high levels of support, may see the first barrier to accessing help as a reason not to pursue matters further. Consequently, they will miss out on building up their *capital*. Staff therefore need to be aware and prevent this happening by removing as many of those barriers as possible.

The experiences of care leavers, particularly at some of the more prestigious universities suggest that students can face problems where the academic side of an institution works very much in isolation from the welfare side, with some universities being described as having a sink or swim attitude towards their students.

“I think a lot of the problems arise because of the work... and because of the study... and it's so.....they are connected.....but they're just like....you're here to study. We'll give you really world class lecturers and really academic lectures, but we don't care if you're struggling and if you've got personal issues. It's sort of like that I think.” (Marie, aged 21, Russell Group institution)

It was suggested that students would benefit from greater cohesion between departments responsible for academic and welfare functions. Wilcox and colleagues (2005) explore the tendency for some academic tutors to regard welfare work as not being part of their role and identify the dissatisfaction amongst students caused by this. This is significant for care leavers if they choose in the first instance, to turn to a member of academic staff for support. They may have no one else they feel able to approach, and it may also initially have taken a lot of courage to approach a staff member. If the staff member is unable to help or put them in touch with the appropriate person, this weak link in their support network represents a deficit in *social capital*. Once again, this presents a potential situation where care leavers may be deterred from pursuing support any further.

Exit support

Chapter 3 described how some HEIs were considering support for care leavers as they graduated from higher education. This included providing financial and housing advice. Although the majority of care leavers did not raise exit support as an issue, one care leaver was very concerned about how her life would change upon graduation.

“Just wait till next year when you hit Earth with a bang. That's what I need... support next year because I'm going to go from having my rent paid, council tax paid, getting this money each week, both of my bursaries, and then I've got this big bang when I hit the ground. I've got to get a job. I've got to pay my rent. I've got to pay my council tax. I...

there needs to be something... there's nothing there that's going to help me." (Kerry, aged 24, post 1992 HEI)

This suggests that exit support would be a useful mechanism for some care leavers, particularly for those who do not have any contact with their birth families or former carers. Unlike students from disadvantaged and traditional backgrounds, care leavers are unlikely to have the safety net of parents to bounce back to upon graduation whilst they find employment and somewhere to live.

Kerry knew what type of help she wanted.

"It's good to provide leaflets, don't get me wrong, but it's nice to speak to somebody to get... because I get really confused about things, so it'd be nice for me next year to sit down with somebody and they're going to say, 'Right Kerry, this is going to happen. You're going to have to start paying rent. You're going to have to start paying council tax. You've got all these debts. Shall we do a plan to at least get you through the first year?'" (Kerry)

The potential consequence of not preparing care leavers such as Kerry for life beyond graduation is that all of the *capital* gained at university and the change in their *habitus* as a result of their positive experiences will be undone. If this occurs, care leavers will not have benefited from their time in higher education and may find themselves back in the position where they started and unlikely to take such a risk again.

The role of named contact

The importance of having a member of staff who understands something about the implications of being a care leaver was highlighted by one student.

"I think about things in a different way to some students, er... and I might find situations harder than... than some other people because I

haven't got that support that most people have with their family.”
(Susan, aged 20, pre 1992 HEI)

Susan was conscious that the relationship which most students had with their families was missing from her support network. She therefore had a deficit in her *social capital*. The role of named contact in HEIs has the potential to help compensate for this deficit by providing care leavers with a substitute figure they can get to know and trust, and turn to for support.

The care leavers interviewed valued having a named member of staff whom they could go to for advice and support, even where individual students had someone else they would go to as a first port of call. This provides a form of *social capital*, which can be drawn on as necessary, compensating for the deficit in *social capital* caused by not having the active support of birth parents. Named contacts within HEIs were described as providing care leavers with a positive support experience and even provoking envy amongst care leavers' friends.

“It's like when I tell people on my course about the services you get it's funny really and they're quite jealous. They say “well that's not fair”. Well I'll say, “What's not fair? I've not got parents” and they come from nice families and that. It's funny really, they get jealous.” (Leah, aged 25, post 1992 HEI)

The importance of named contacts as access points for information and support was highlighted when care leavers discussed the range of support on offer at their HEIs. Interviewees often struggled to identify support provision unless they had accessed it personally, or assumed certain types of support existed, even though they had not checked whether this was actually the case. Provided care leavers knew they had a named contact they could approach for information or help when required, they were not particularly concerned with knowing about the specific services provided. As such, it appears that they valued the reassurance of knowing there was someone to contact about support as much as support itself. This is arguably a healthy

outlook to have as being a care leaver should not automatically mean requiring multiple forms of support. The perception of a named contact as someone who is available in the event that care leavers need support or advice could be compared, therefore, to the safety net that birth parents provide to their children in higher education. To an extent, the named contact assumes the role of a substitute parent. Named contacts are unable to fully assume this role as they remain members of staff supporting care leavers in their professional capacity and would not, for example, be available to talk to care leavers outside of office hours.

Accommodation

Two of the care leavers interviewed described applying to their local HEIs in order to retain their council tenancies.

CL: "I got allocated [a council flat]. I think you get a lot of points for being in care. They kind of put you up to the top of the letting ladder.

Int: Are you living in that place now?

CL: Yes, I think that's what affected my decision to come. I didn't want to give it up. If I'd gone somewhere else to another university and it didn't work out, I'd have nowhere to go, so I was limited really to the choice." (Leah, aged 25, post 1992 HEI)

This reflects the concern of HEI staff discussed in Chapter 3 that some care leavers are choosing the short term *cultural capital* of a council tenancy over the longer term *cultural and social capital* provided by attending the best possible HEI and building up new supportive relationships at university. However, Leah's fear of being homeless in the event of university not working out underlines the significance of the decision for care leavers. It also highlights the limits on the extent to which local authorities as corporate parents and HEIs can replicate the support provided by birth parents.

Although HEI and local authority staff can do everything within their powers to help care leavers secure suitable accommodation, unlike birth parents they cannot guarantee a care leaver somewhere to live if they leave university.

Small gestures of support

Sara was supported in her preparation for higher education by her foster mother, her extended foster family and her boyfriend's family. Her extended foster family donated household equipment to her and her boyfriend's family gave her some money. Her foster mother then helped her move into halls and unpack her belongings.

“CL I valued that a lot, and to be honest, I preferred [being given things] than having to like go out and buy it all..

Int: Yes

CL: because it's like... you know.... something that happens when a person goes to uni... you s-, they get given stuff by their family and whether or not it's biological family, it was just nice to know that I've got that...” (Sara, aged 20, post 1992 HEI)

The interviews with care leavers revealed how in many ways, small gestures of support by carers or others could be equally, if not more valuable than substantial support measures.

Elliot was visited at the start of his course by his foster parents with whom he had maintained a close relationship. He recalled them giving him a box of groceries and also a silver box, which his foster mother told him to open if he had a bad day.

“So about a week in, I was like... kind of had a really crap lecture or something. I just wanted to leave uni... opened [the box] and found four tubs of Angel Delight, a £20 note in there and a card saying ‘Smile, life can only get better from today onwards.’” (Elliot, aged 28, post 1992 HEI)

There was a post it note attached to the £20 note telling him to have a drink in the bar and forget about the day, which he did and stayed with his course. His foster parents replenished the box whenever they visited.

Small gestures by professionals also meant a lot to care leavers. Anna appreciated her named contact finding a temporary home for her cats when she had to go into emergency university accommodation.

“..... rather than just thinking oh well, just put the cats in a shelter 'cause it doesn't matter, they're only cats kind of thing it was kind of like taken seriously.” (Anna, aged 20, pre 1992 HEI)

Susan appreciated the effort made by her leaving care workers to arrange for a birth parent to take her to university on her first day.

“They actually drove me all the way [across the country] to my dad's.”
(Susan, aged 20, pre 1992 HEI)

Again, this is a relatively small act, but one which was valued and made it possible for this care leaver to have the normative experience of being dropped off at university by a family member.

Despite being relatively small gestures of support, they are significant because they replicate the things that parents do for their children when they enter higher education. They are not lavish gestures, but show thoughtfulness. Ward (2011) explores the importance of treasured possessions in helping care leavers to retain a sense of identity and self continuity as they make the potentially difficult transition into adulthood. The

gestures of support described by care leavers in the present study can be seen as providing a similar function in that they help cement a bond between care leavers and the individuals who are important to them such as foster parents. Alternatively, they enable care leavers to retain objects that are meaningful or reassuring such as a pet cat or messages from home which provide continuity through a period of disruption or uncertainty. These gestures are also valuable in terms of building *capital* if they are absorbed into a care leaver's *habitus*, making them feel their higher education experiences are very similar to those of other students. The examples above also demonstrate how the actions of professionals can make a lasting positive impact. These gestures strengthen the relationship between care leavers and those supporting them. This is important if it encourages care leavers to use and build upon their *social capital* by seeking out support rather than being overly self reliant.

7 Determination and self-reliance

A striking aspect of the interviews with care leavers, which has already been touched upon in this chapter, was the degree of determination and self reliance they demonstrated. Although these qualities were also exhibited by the disadvantaged students interviewed, it was not found to the same extent as it was amongst care leavers. It can be viewed as an asset, providing a possible explanation as to why these young people succeeded in reaching higher education, despite having neither high levels of *capital*, nor benefiting from the *capital* held by birth parents and family.

A number of care leavers interviewed described how being in unhappy situations became a trigger point in giving them the determination to make a success of their education.

“.... when I was in care and those few years I was exposed to different things and I was around the general atmosphere of people who weren't succeeding very well.... who were sort of being lost in the system really, academic failure. People who were failing at a very low level, not

passing GCSEs and things and I think watching that, I didn't want to be part of that..." (Marie, aged 21, pre 1992 HEI)

"I think it probably does actually relate back to being in care and leaving... leaving school... in a care system with no qualifications and with... with nothing apart from my head and my hands I suppose [...] I definitely think it does relate back to wanting to do something for myself, something positive." (Will, aged 36, post 1992 HEI)

When care leavers described the decision to enter higher education, there was frequently an element of stepping into the unknown and taking a risk because they lacked support. Often individuals had no way of knowing how they would achieve their goals financially or practically, but were absolutely certain that they wanted to change their lives for the better. These young people are likely to be those Stein describes as 'moving on' in that they had been able, "to make good use of the help they have been offered" and were moving forward positively with their lives (Stein 2008, p41).

Skuse and Ward (2003) described finding similar 'precocious maturity' amongst some of the young people in their study of children's views of care. However, they suggest that although this maturity may be a manifestation of resilience for some young people, for others it may be a coping mechanism for hiding their feelings.

Although self-reliance may function as an asset on one level, helping care leavers to achieve despite the system and deficits in *capital*, it may also prevent them from reaching out for support where it is available. This reluctance may be a consequence of their *habitus* and therefore a response to past negative experiences

CL: "They said when they contacted me in my first year I could ask them for anything really that I wanted, books or a laptop or something like that, but I didn't really want anything to do with

them. I didn't want to get involved with it, so I just kind of changed my number and got rid of my phone.

Int: Why was that, that you didn't want it?

CL: Because they'd been useless. Completely useless." (Verity, aged 20, pre 1992 HEI)

The result of this may be individuals missing the opportunity to acquire further *capital* or effectively using what they already possess to improve their lives.

Lack of expectation

Closely tied in with the concept of self-reliance is lack of expectation.

"Do you know, 'cause I'm older, I'm one of the oldest ones now and er, I think that... I think their [social services] expectations of me is that I should be alright. I should be standing on me own two feet. I should.... I shouldn't be having to ring for support now.... do you know what I mean? That's my expec-, that's what I think in my head. Whether it's true or not I don't know." (Kerry, aged 24, post 1992 HEI)

Throughout the interviews care leavers identified where they needed more support from the carers and professionals, but were very matter of fact in their expectation that support would not be forthcoming.

Most of the care leavers interviewed believed that ultimately, they could only rely upon themselves, even where they described having been supported by others. To feel this way implies that in the past they may not have received the care they needed from those responsible for supporting them. Munro (2001) suggests that the pressure on social workers to meet targets has led to less time being available to spend time and build up relationships with young people. This may provide one explanation as to the low levels of expectation amongst care leavers.

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“I mean I never really... I never really.... I've never ever requ-, relied on anyone. I mean that was through, through from what I've gone through, er I just never relied on anyone if.... If..... I'm gonna have to do it myself. That.... that was it from foster care.” (James, aged 27, Russell Group HEI)

Bourdieu refers to this acceptance that support will not be forthcoming and the subsequent adjustment in expectation as symbolic violence: “the violence which is exercised upon a social agent with his or her complicity.” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) By accepting the situation and succeeding despite a lack of support or *capital*, care leavers can be seen as perpetuating the situation. A care leaver's success could be viewed as relieving the pressure on those responsible for their care from fully supporting them. However, this thesis provides evidence that not all care leavers undermine themselves in this way, and that they are also successfully seeking out and accessing support which is helping them to build up their levels of *capital*.

Lack of expectation, in the same way as self-reliance, can therefore be viewed both as an asset and disadvantage to care leavers in building *capital*. It helps protect care leavers from the disappointment of being let down by those around them, but also means they settle for less than they deserve and reduces the pressure on those responsible for supporting them.

9 Conclusion

Despite the challenges described by the care leavers interviewed, this study provides evidence of care leavers managing to build up the *economic, social and cultural capital* needed to succeed in higher education despite the odds. Although care leavers represent some of the most disadvantaged young people in society, the individuals in this study have successfully deviated from the life course trajectory expected of those from their social background.

A number of care leavers described receiving positive support from social workers, carers and teachers, helping to compensate for the lack of support

received from birth families. The types of support described included funding (*economic capital*), encouragement to aspire and achieve educationally (*cultural capital*) and having someone to approach for advice or reassurance (*social capital*). Overall, care leavers greatly valued the support they received including discreet support such as named contacts and care leaver bursaries.

The interviews with care leavers also revealed gaps in support resulting in deficits in their *capital*. In terms of *economic capital*, care leavers were viewed enviously by some of their peers as they were relatively cash rich. However, this represented the entirety of the *capital* available to them, unlike students with parents able to contribute additional sums and act as financial safety nets. Care leavers described mixed experiences of financial support depending upon their local authority or HEI. The system of financial support was confusing for some. Care leavers were trying to cope with pre-existing debt as a consequence of being unprepared for leaving care. There were also mixed experiences of non financial support revealing deficits in *cultural* and *social capital*. A number of care leavers described lacking support at school to achieve educationally and to complete the UCAS application form. Care leavers described having been uncertain about the implications of disclosing their care backgrounds and several were unsure whether they had actually disclosed. Failure to understand the benefits and implications of disclosure acts as a barrier to accessing support that could help care leavers to build up their levels of *capital*. Care leavers also wanted timely, accurate and clearer information about the support available to them.

The interviews also revealed certain common characteristics amongst care leavers such as financial maturity, self reliance and lack of expectation, possibly developed as a result of their care or pre care experiences. These characteristics can be regarded as having both a positive and negative impact on the experiences of care leavers. On the one hand, they may help protect care leavers from deficits in support by reducing their reliance upon other people. In effect, using one form of *capital* (e.g. self-reliance) to overcome deficits in other forms of *capital*. However, these same characteristics also placed a barrier between care leavers and those around them, for example,

by making them reluctant to interact with individuals capable of providing support. This suggests that when developing support provision for care leavers in higher education, particular attention needs to be given to how best to engage with these individuals to ensure they understand the potential benefits.

Finally, this chapter highlights the overlaps between the experiences of care leavers and students from other disadvantaged backgrounds. Where care leavers were receiving funding from their local authorities and HEIs, they described being able to cope financially, although like many of the disadvantaged students they were reliant upon part-time employment to make ends meet. This suggests that the current structure of funding can meet the financial needs of care leavers in higher education and provide sufficient *economic capital* to allow them to participate in undergraduate life, although they may possess less *economic capital* than students from more privileged backgrounds. However, where care leavers experienced difficulties securing money they were entitled to, or had been promised, they found themselves with a deficit in *capital*. The greatest difference between the experiences of the two groups was found to exist in relation to non financial issues. Parents played a significant role in providing non financial support to students from disadvantaged backgrounds both before and once they entered higher education. Parents were described as encouraging aspiration, providing practical and emotional support, and were a safety net for young people testing out their independence for the first time. Although some care leavers described receiving encouragement and support from carers, HEI staff and social workers, this is where many of the deficits in support and *capital* identified occurred.

Despite facing challenges and being at a disadvantage compared to other students, none of the care leavers interviewed expressed regret at having made the decision to enter higher education and they valued the support they had received.

“I just think it’s the best support I’ve had like. Coming to uni was the best decision. I think I would have been a lot more of a mess if I was not at university.” (Verity, aged 20, pre 1992 HEI)

Chapter 7

Conclusion

To say that the members of a class initially possessing a certain economic and cultural capital are destined, with a given probability, to an educational and social trajectory leading to a given position means in fact that a fraction of the class (which cannot be determined a priori within the limits of this explanatory system) will deviate from the trajectory most common for the class as a whole and follow the (higher or lower) trajectory which was most probable for members of another class (Bourdieu 1984, p111).

By entering higher education, the care leavers in this study have attempted to become that fraction of a class deviating from the expected trajectory for those with care backgrounds. This is despite any negative impact their pre care or care experiences have had on their *habitus* and without the levels of *economic, social and cultural capital* possessed by many young people growing up with their birth parents. This study has explored care leavers' experiences, and the availability and functioning of support provision during this transitional period of their lives.

This study has shown the range of support available to care leavers entering higher education in England from both local authorities and HEIs. Although these findings are not necessarily representative of local authorities and HEIs nationally, they suggest that over the relatively short period of time since publication of the *Going to University from Care* study (Jackson and colleagues 2005) there have been significant developments in support. This support can help positively impact care leavers' *habitus* and provides the *economic, social and cultural capital* necessary to take full advantage of the

opportunities available in the *field of higher education* in a similar way to their peers. Support also provides care leavers with the tools to further increase these levels of *capital* whilst at university, increasing their chances of deviating from the life course trajectory expected for individuals from such disadvantaged backgrounds (Bourdieu 1984).

However, despite the HEIs and local authorities in this study developing and implementing support packages, the interviews with care leavers and support providers showed that across some areas of care leavers' lives, support was either lacking or elements of the delivery process resulted in care leavers failing to fully benefit from it. Consequently, care leavers were experiencing greater deficits in *economic, social and cultural capital* than their peers.

In terms of *economic capital*, where care leavers had received financial support from both their local authorities and HEIs, they described being generally able to cope. Depending upon which local authority and HEI a care leaver received their funding from, economic support packages could be very generous, in some cases enabling care leavers to graduate in a better financial position than many of their peers. Where care leavers received local authority and HEI support, they were seen by their peers as being cash rich as a result of receiving termly or annual instalments. However, unless care leavers had other sources of income such as contributions from birth families or carers, their money had to last the year and cover all eventualities. This differentiated them from students from other disadvantaged backgrounds, who had the safety net of their parents as a last resort if they ran out of money. Care leavers faced deficits in *economic capital* where promises of support were not fulfilled, for example, by their local authorities. Failure by care leavers to disclose a care background to their HEIs, whether intentionally or unknowingly, also meant *economic capital* not being accessed. Care leavers showed a similar reliance to disadvantaged students upon part-time employment during term-time.

Overall, the care leavers in the sample had lower levels of *social and cultural capital* than those students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Although some

care leavers described having received support and encouragement from their local authorities, carers and HEI staff, this did not compensate for a lack of birth parents who traditionally provide emotional and practical support to students. This raises questions about how far professional relationships can realistically compensate for personal ones.

Care leavers' habitus, formed as a result of their pre-care and care experiences meant that care leavers tended to have very little expectation of being supported and developed high levels of self-reliance. Although this may have provided a means of coping with deficits in support, reluctance to expect or seek out help meant care leavers could fail to access valuable support.

Where care leavers faced deficits in the operation of their *capital* within the *field of higher education*, there was a risk of the gap between them and more advantaged students growing wider during this time, rather than it providing an opportunity to reduce the levels of social inequality between the two groups.

1 Deficits in *capital*

The study revealed a number of areas where care leavers appeared to be at particular risk of experiencing deficits in *capital*.

Insufficient financial support (*economic capital*)

Care leavers were at a clear risk of deficits in *economic capital*, where they had insufficient financial support. As stated above, where financial support was received from both a local authority and HEI, care leavers generally described being able to cope on that money, although the majority of those interviewed also had part-time employment during term time. Care leavers valued the financial support they received, but encountered difficulties where they relied upon assurances by local authorities that contributions would be paid towards the cost of items such as rent and course materials, which were subsequently never paid. Interviews with support providers and care leavers

also revealed variation in the levels of financial support provided by local authorities and HEIs. This finding suggests that the lack of consistency in financial support across the country identified by Jackson and colleagues (2005) still exists, despite more support being available to care leavers overall since that study was undertaken. However, since the data collection phase of the current study, the government has introduced a new duty under the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 for local authorities to pay £2000 to care leavers in higher education, which should go some way to ensuring a consistent minimum level of financial support. Where care leavers experience deficits in *economic capital* because financial support is promised but not paid, or because they come from an authority or attend a HEI providing relatively modest financial support, there is a risk that undergraduates will be prevented from participating in student life to the same extent as their peers. This may mean not taking part in academic and social activities or being forced to take on significant part-time employment at the risk of their academic success.

Insufficient practical and emotional support (*social and cultural capital*)

The study revealed some care leavers experiencing deficits in *social and cultural capital*. This was predominantly caused by gaps in the practical and emotional support available to care leavers in the period leading up to higher education and once on course. The key difference between care leavers and other students, including those from other disadvantaged backgrounds, is that care leavers are unlikely to have the safety net traditionally provided to undergraduates by their birth parents. There were some instances where care leavers described being encouraged and very well supported, particularly where they had lived in stable foster placements. However, overall despite many carers and professionals such as social care staff and teachers working to fill the gaps left by birth families, the experiences of care leavers in this study suggest that the system is currently failing to adequately compensate for the absence of birth parents. This represented the greatest difference found between the experiences of care leavers and students from other disadvantaged backgrounds. The findings showed that care leavers were not

always encouraged to aspire educationally and in some cases, were actively discouraged from continuing their education. Several care leavers described negotiating the decision making and university application process alone or with minimal support. Once at university, care leavers did not always have strong support networks, although several individuals had positive experiences of being appointed a named member of student support staff or 'named contact' as an access point for support.

2 Factors contributing to deficits in *capital*

The findings of this study suggest a number of key factors affecting the ability of support providers to compensate for the absence of birth parents and provide care leavers with sufficient *economic, social and cultural capital* to make the most of the opportunities open to them in higher education.

Differing agendas

The study has highlighted the existence of three groups of people (care leavers, local authorities and HEIs) with different agendas and perspectives. Even though local authorities and HEIs have the same overall aim of supporting care leavers through higher education, they work within different parameters and have different priorities. These differing agendas and perspectives all affect the provision of support. Members of all three groups have differing levels of familiarity with the *field of higher education* and the actions and decisions of both support providers and recipients will be influenced by their individual *habitus*, formed as a result of their own past life experience.

Care Leavers

The care leavers interviewed were all individuals looking for different levels of support and contact. Despite this, several common themes emerged. Care leavers wanted timely and clear information on support. They preferred support providers to be proactive, but were willing to inform staff if support or

attention was unwanted. Above all, care leavers wanted support to be easily available allowing them to get on with the business of being students in the same way as their peers.

Local authorities

The relationship between local authority and care leaver may have existed for a number of years depending on when a young person became 'looked after'. Because of their corporate parenting role, local authority staff had an awareness of the abuse, neglect or trauma that care leavers had experienced in their lives and an understanding of the potential long-term implications of that. The level of support local authorities are required to provide to care leavers throughout their time in higher education is dictated by statute. Certain elements of that support, such as the payment of £2000 to care leavers in higher education, are expressly set out in the legislation, whereas authorities have greater discretion over other forms of provision. The definition of care leaver used to establish eligibility for support is also defined by statute. The local authorities in the current sample described being very aware of the need to encourage looked after children and care leavers educationally, to inform them of the available support package for higher education, and to aim to provide care leavers with the same level of support as they would give their own children. Local authority expectations of support, therefore, matched many of the needs described by care leavers in this study. However, care leavers described situations where their needs had not been met by their local authorities in this way. This suggests that the local authorities participating in this study may have been those who had decided to focus on the educational success of care leavers. Other local authorities, such as those described by the care leaver interviewed may not have had the same expectations of the support required by care leavers in higher education.

HEIs

HEI staff come into contact with care leavers at a later stage in their lives than local authority social workers and personal advisers. The higher education environment is a place of emerging adulthood for undergraduate students generally, including care leavers, and the staff interviewed were aware of encouraging that independence. HEI staff have greater flexibility in who they provide with support. They are subject to budget constraints rather than a statutory definition of a care leaver, and this enables them to support students based on need even if they would not fall within the definition used by local authorities.

The significance of the relationship between care leaver and support provider

The study showed that much support provision was heavily dependent upon the existence of a relationship between care leaver and support provider, for example, care leavers tended to disclose their care backgrounds to people they trusted. The relationship itself represents a form of *social capital* and it provides a route through which support can be channelled and therefore further *capital* acquired. Where relationships are strained or non-existent, the ability of support providers to compensate for a lack of *social and cultural capital* is restricted. The experiences of care leavers and support providers in this study suggest that the existence of a relationship is particularly important in the provision of non financial support, which can not be easily achieved without one to one interaction.

The findings also show how different the relationship is between a care leaver and their local authority, and a care leaver and their HEI. They are relationships started at different points in time under very different circumstances. Care leavers begin their relationships with local authority staff as looked after children when they are younger, often as a result of abuse or neglect by birth parents, and their social worker will have been appointed to

them. Care leavers begin their relationships with HEI staff as young adults. The relationship is not imposed upon them and it comes about as a result of the experience of going to university. The circumstances in which the two relationships are born could not be more different regardless of how well intentioned the staff in both organisations are. The implication of this is that HEIs and local authorities will most effectively provide support and reduce deficits in *capital* by working together and utilizing the strengths of their respective relationships with care leavers. For example, local authorities are well placed to prepare care leavers for higher education by explaining the disclosure process.

The findings also demonstrate situations where support providers are stepping into the role normally fulfilled by birth parents. There were mixed views on how far professionals should go in assuming this role. HEI staff, in particular, were conscious of higher education as a period of emerging independence, whereas local authority staff had an ongoing duty to maintain contact with care leavers. However comprehensive and pro-active the support of HEIs and local authorities was, the interviews with care leavers suggest that professionals were unable to match the levels of *social and cultural capital* provided by birth parents. Most significantly, professionals are unable to provide the same safety net as birth parents.

Communicating the support message

Effective communication of the support message to care leavers was found to be important as without it, the best support in the world becomes ineffective. Effective communication therefore provided the keys to unlocking *capital*. The study revealed a gap between the levels of support described by local authorities and HEIs, and the levels of awareness expressed by care leavers and students from other disadvantaged backgrounds. Word of mouth and chance played a large part in students' narratives on the support they had accessed and often support was only accessed once students were some way into their degree programmes. Inaccurate and confusing support information also caused unwanted difficulty and stress for individual students.

For care leavers, one to one relationships such as those with a carer or named contact were key to ensuring that they successfully received support information. Care leavers wanted timely and accurate information and valued someone making the effort to discuss matters on a one to one basis. This reflects normative expectations where parents ensure their children understand what support they will receive before they enter higher education.

There was also a lack of understanding amongst some care leavers of the benefits and implications of disclosing a care background to HEIs. The UCAS application form tick box enabling care leavers to disclose a care background came into effect after many of the care leavers in this study had started university. Despite this, the findings highlight the importance of ensuring that before care leavers begin the higher education application process they understand what it means to disclose either directly to their HEI or through the UCAS tick box and why it is in their interests to do so.

Accommodation

Jackson and colleagues (2005) identified the risk of homelessness amongst care leavers during vacation periods, and this was subsequently addressed by legislation placing a duty on local authorities to fund vacation accommodation (s24B Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000). This study showed an increase in provision of 365 day accommodation by HEIs since publication of the Jackson research. However, care leavers expressed reluctance at living in halls of residence primarily because of the fear of isolation during holidays. A number of care leavers did not enter higher education straight from school aged 18 because the disruption to their lives either before or whilst in care delayed their educational progress, or because they left care before they were 18 and later decided to return to education. As a result, these care leavers were deterred from living in halls as they were often older than other first year students or had already lived independently. Not living in halls of residence meant that care leavers missed out on forming close friendships with other students, relationships which strengthen a student's support network and provide valuable *social capital*. In addition to missing out on the emotional

support friends provide to one another, care leavers also missed out on activities centred around halls life and hearing about support from other students. Reluctance by care leavers to live in halls of residence was recognised as an issue by many of the support providers interviewed and some HEIs and local authorities were looking at alternative options to make halls more appealing, such as setting up reciprocal arrangements for students to spend holidays living at HEIs nearer their homes.

Some care leavers had already been allocated council accommodation before entering higher education. They expressed an unwillingness to give up these tenancies to move into university accommodation. In light of the current shortages of affordable housing, it is understandable that care leavers were concerned about giving up their properties. Having a home of their own provides security and *cultural capital* which is likely to be particularly significant for a care leaver who has experienced multiple placement changes or lived in a residential home environment. Giving up a council tenancy therefore involved a trade off between the immediate *cultural capital* provided by having a home and the potential longer term *social and cultural capital* to be gained from moving into halls of residence and being fully immersed in the higher education experience. One solution to this situation, subject to housing stock, would be for local authorities to guarantee that care leavers would not find themselves at the bottom of a waiting list for housing if they needed council accommodation upon graduation. In a sense, this situation also entails a trade off in long and short term *economic capital* for local authorities as much as care leavers. Reassuring care leavers that accommodation would be provided upon graduation if they should need it may be the best way for authorities to encourage individuals to make the most of the opportunities in higher education. By encouraging care leavers in this way, authorities increase the likelihood of care leavers building up sufficient *capital* at university to lead successful adult lives in future free from dependency on welfare and social housing.

Mature students

The route taken into higher education by the mature students in the sample was more circuitous than those care leavers who had made the direct transition from school to university at the age of 18. Care leavers who left care young with little preparation and understanding of budgeting and paying bills, had accrued debts which they were continuing to pay off as students. Servicing this pre-existing debt out of the funding available to care leavers in higher education created a deficit in *economic capital* for a number of the mature students interviewed in addition to other deficits experienced by care leavers.

3 How are care leavers coping with deficits in capital?

The majority of care leavers in this study were managing to successfully navigate their route through the *field of higher education* despite deficits in *capital*. The findings suggest that in order to achieve this, care leavers coped with deficits in a number of ways.

The trade off between different forms of *capital*

Earlier in this chapter the reluctance of some care leavers to move into university accommodation and give up their council tenancies was discussed. This is an example of care leavers having to make a decision between two forms of *capital*, the *cultural capital* provided by having a home and tenancy, and the opportunity to gain other forms of *capital* by moving into halls of residence. A further example of this trade off can be seen where care leavers gain short-term *economic capital* by taking on part-time employment, but risk losing out on long-term *cultural capital* if that job affects their ability to get a good degree. Care leavers had to make decisions about retaining one form of *capital*, usually providing a short term benefit, to the exclusion of another form of *capital* with longer term benefits. Although students of all backgrounds may have to make trade offs between forms of *capital* at some point, the consequences of those decisions are likely to be of less significance than for

someone with limited support and resources such as a care leaver. For example, most students do not have to decide whether to give up their home when deciding whether to move into halls of residence as they return to live with their parents in vacation periods.

Developing one form of *capital* to protect from a deficit in another form of *capital*

The findings show that some care leavers developed qualities such as high levels of determination, self-reliance and 'precocious maturity' (Skuse and Ward 2003) to help them cope with deficits in *capital*, for example the deficit in *cultural capital* caused by a lack of encouragement to achieve educationally. Such qualities can be seen as developing as a result of a care leaver's *habitus*, or disposition influenced by their early life experiences. They have grown up quickly and learned not to rely on others in response to their childhood circumstances. In certain contexts, these qualities would themselves be considered valued forms of *cultural capital*. For example, in a sporting context determination and self-reliance are valued as key to success. However, in the *field of higher education*, qualities such as self-reliance can also result in care leavers failing to build the new relationships with staff and students needed to access other forms of *capital*.

The power of small gestures and sentimental items

The findings show that small gestures and items from carers, social care and HEI staff are often of great importance to care leavers. This reflects the arguments of Ward (2011), who states that care leavers' possessions can have a symbolic value helping to maintain a sense of continuity of self and the thread of identity. The gestures and items described by care leavers in the current study can be viewed as helping maintain their sense of identity through others recognising what is important to them as individuals. Such gestures and items also help to reinforce existing and new supportive relationships, which will assist care leavers settling into the unfamiliar *field of higher education*. These relationships will form the basis of a care leaver's

support network and provide the route through which support and therefore *capital* can be accessed as they progress through higher education.

4 Buttle UK Quality Mark

Throughout this study, the impact of the Buttle UK Quality Mark on support for care leavers has been considered. Awarded to those HEIs demonstrating an ongoing commitment to supporting care leavers in higher education, it has the potential to help reduce the deficits in *capital* currently being experienced by care leavers. Although the Quality Mark was relatively new at the point of data collection in this study, support providers considered it was having a positive impact on provision for care leavers in higher education. Since then, it has been awarded to over 60 HEIs in England, suggesting that its impact will have developed further.

The Quality Mark was seen as having both an internal and external impact. It was viewed as providing student support staff with internal leverage when establishing support for care leavers. The Quality Mark was described as having helped staff secure resources and funding from senior management and also aided negotiations with other departments within HEIs, for example, in securing 365 day accommodation. HEI staff also felt that the Quality Mark provided a useful framework for developing support provision. This was particularly valuable as it reduced the amount of time involved in developing support for staff who had generally assumed responsibility for care leavers in addition to their existing remits. There was recognition of the Quality Mark externally, although the timing of this study meant that HEIs were generally in the process of developing their provision and had not yet widely publicised their support packages for care leavers.

In view of the challenges identified by this study for HEI and local authority staff supporting care leavers, the Quality Mark has a particularly important role to play in raising awareness of support and the routes for accessing it. As HEIs publicise their Quality Marks more widely, it will be a potentially important tool in raising awareness of support before care leavers reach

university, so they are fully informed before making decisions on what and where to study. As awareness of the Quality Mark increases, it will provide an indication to local authorities of those HEIs attempting to respond to the specific needs of students with care backgrounds. In future, this may encourage greater levels of joint working between HEIs and local authorities, improving the process of support provision and reducing overall deficits in *capital*.

5 Areas for future consideration

The final section of this chapter sets out a number of areas for future consideration based on the findings of this study and also in light of current changes to the higher education landscape as a result of funding reforms.

Preparing care leavers for the field of higher education

Local authorities have a key role in preparing care leavers for the unfamiliar *field of higher education* as recognised by the revised guidance to the Children Act 1989 (Department of Education 2010a). Key to this preparation is the provision of support information and explaining the benefits and implications of disclosure of a care background to HEIs. Before beginning the UCAS application process, care leavers also need to be provided with detailed, accurate information on the support they will receive from their local authority and on the packages of support offered by their prospective HEIs.

There also needs to be an element of forward thinking by local authorities supporting care leavers considering applying for higher education. In the years before applying, care leavers need to be provided with opportunities to participate in extra curricular activities and work experience that will strengthen their UCAS applications. Prospective students also need to be made aware of the need to adhere to the strict application deadlines. This all requires the support of a concerned and informed adult figure.

The economic landscape

The financial climate is going to present challenges for HEIs and local authorities supporting care leavers in higher education. Awareness of care leavers in higher education came to the fore with the Jackson study in 2005 when the economy was in a stronger position than today. In future, it is likely that local authorities and HEIs will have fewer resources to provide support to an increased number of care leavers if participation rates continue to grow. This scenario was acknowledged by staff in both types of organisation. Embedding care leaver support within existing student welfare provision is therefore likely to become increasingly important for HEIs. To ensure care leavers are well prepared for higher education and have the necessary support throughout that time, support providers will need to work together and recognise how organisations can best utilise their respective strengths and positions.

Providing realistic levels of financial support

It will be important that local authorities and HEIs keep up with current and future changes in the funding of higher education to ensure care leavers do not find themselves priced out of higher education or deterred by the prospect of graduating with thousands of pounds of debt.

Exit support

Some HEIs had already started to explore the potential for supporting care leavers as they approached graduation. Current economic conditions suggest there will be an increasing need to consider exit support in view of the current levels of graduate unemployment and the increasing costs of housing and living. Care leavers may have acquired *economic, social and cultural capital* as a result of the support received in higher education, but there is a risk of these gains being lost if care leavers find themselves unemployed or homeless upon graduation. In terms of the transition from care into adulthood, there is a risk that support providers do nothing more than delay an abrupt

transition into adulthood if care leavers are inadequately prepared for life after graduation.

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Appendix 1:

Internet questionnaire sent to HEIs

Overcoming by Degrees: looking at the experiences of care leavers in higher...

The aim of the research is to explore the impact of measures designed to improve the experiences of young people entering higher education from local authority care. The research is being funded by the Loughborough University Development Trust and is being supported by the Frank Buttle Trust, who developed the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark recognizing those institutions offering higher education provision that show a commitment to care leavers.

The aim of this survey is to gather information about the different ways that institutions are supporting young people from care backgrounds.

Please complete Part 1 of the survey, which asks for some basic information about the support your institution offers. This will take approximately 5 minutes.

Part 2 asks about your provision in greater detail and will take approximately 10 minutes.

If you do not wish to complete Part 2, please move straight to the end of the survey once you have completed Part 1.

Please note: throughout this survey, students who have experienced local authority care are referred to as 'Care Leavers'.

The responses you give in this survey will remain anonymous. Your identity and that of your institution will not be revealed in any report resulting from this research.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.

Georgia Hyde-Dryden

Part 1 - Basic Information

* 1. Please enter your job title.

* 2. Briefly describe your role.

* 3. What is the name of your institution?

* 4. Does your institution have a specific policy of support for care leavers?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Don't know

5. Has your institution been awarded the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark?

☐ Yes

☐ No, but we are in the process of applying

☐ No, but we are considering making an application

☐ No and we currently have no plans to apply for it

☐ Don't know

☐ Other (please specify)

* 6. Which types of support does your institution currently provide to any groups of under represented or non traditional students and of these, which are targeted at care leavers? (Please select all that apply)

	Support provided	Targeted at care leavers
Outreach provision, e.g. summer schools	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Extra advice/assistance with applications	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Bursaries/financial support	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mentoring schemes for existing students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
365 day accommodation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
A named advisor for discussing non-academic issues	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Counselling/emotional support	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
None	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Other (please specify)

* 7. What types of data does your institution collect about its support services?
(This question refers to your full range of support services, not just those available to care leavers)

- ☐ Data on user numbers
- ☐ Student satisfaction surveys
- ☐ Evaluations of support services
- ☐ Data on student progression/outcomes
- ☐ None
- ☐ Don't know
- ☐ Other (please specify)

* 8. What data does your institution collect relating specifically to care leavers?

- ☐ Numbers of known care leavers attending your institution
- ☐ Types of support service/provision used by individual care leavers
- ☐ Data on care leaver progression/outcomes
- ☐ Information required in accordance with the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark
- ☐ None
- ☐ Don't know
- ☐ Other (please specify)

* 9. Would you be willing to make any of the data referred to in questions 7 and 8 available for the purpose of this research?

☐ Yes

☐ No

* 10. Would you be willing to take part in a telephone interview to talk about the support your institution offers care leavers in greater depth?

- ☐ Yes (please provide name and contact details below)
- ☐ No

Contact details

END OF PART 1

Please click 'Next' to continue to Part 2.

If you do not wish to complete Part 2, continue to click 'Next' until you reach the end of the survey.

Part 2 - Looking at support provision in greater depth

Your institution's approach to supporting care leavers

1. When a student discloses their care leaver status, which of the following options best describes your institution's approach to providing information about available support?

☐ All information about support is provided through a 'one stop shop' or single information point

☐ Individual departments provide information to students about the support they offer

☐ Don't know

Other (please specify)

2. Which of the following options best describes your institution's approach to arranging support for care leavers? (select one answer only)

☐ Student support staff will, as a matter of course offer to arrange support on behalf of a care leaver

☐ Student support staff will arrange support on behalf of a care leaver if requested

☐ The care leaver decides which elements of support are appropriate for him/her and applies via the student support office

☐ The care leaver decides which elements of support are appropriate for him/her and applies to the relevant departments direct

☐ Don't know

Other (please specify)

Outreach provision

1. Which types of outreach do you currently provide to any groups of under represented or non traditional students and of these, which are targeted at care leavers? (Please select all that apply)

	Currently provided	Targeted at care leavers
Summer schools	€	€
Taster days	€	€
Staff or students visiting schools to talk to pupils	€	€
Mentoring	€	€
Working with local authorities	€	€
None	€	€

Other (please specify)

Financial support for care leavers

1. What level of bursary/financial support does your institution provide exclusively for care leavers? i.e. a care leaver bursary

☐ We do not provide a bursary/financial support exclusively for care leavers

☐ Don't know

State amount paid and whether annual or one off payment

2. Is this bursary/financial support in addition to, or instead of other bursaries which a care leaver may qualify for, i.e. bursaries for students from low income households?

☐ In addition to other bursaries

☐ Instead of other bursaries

☐ Don't know

☐ Not applicable

Other (please specify)

3. Is this bursary/financial support means tested? (select one answer only)

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Don't know

☐ Not applicable

Other (please specify)

4. When and how is this bursary/financial support paid to care leavers?

Paid as a lump sum in the following month (state month)

Paid by instalments in the following months (state months)

Where instalments are not equal, confirm which instalment is the largest

5. If your institution uses its government funding (i.e. from HEFCE) to pay bursaries to care leavers or other disadvantaged students, does it receive the funding before the bursaries are paid out?

☐ We do not use government funding to pay bursaries to care leavers or other disadvantaged students

☐ We receive all of the government funding required to cover bursary payments before the bursaries are paid out

☐ We receive a proportion of the government funding required to cover bursary payments before the bursaries are paid out

☐ None of the government funding required to cover bursary payments is received before the bursaries are paid out

☐ Don't know

Other (please specify)

Accommodation for care leavers

1. Does your accommodation service have a specific policy for care leavers?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ Don't know

☐ Not applicable

Other (please specify)

2. How does your institution provide accommodation for care leavers during holiday periods? (Select all options that apply)

☐ We do not offer care leavers accommodation during holiday periods

☐ Care leavers may choose to remain in their usual rooms throughout holiday periods

☐ Care leavers have the option of remaining in accommodation throughout holiday periods, but not necessarily in their usual rooms

☐ Care leavers are given the option of moving into residences/ halls with other students remaining during holiday periods

☐ We try and make arrangements with other colleges and universities so that care leavers have the option of staying in accommodation nearer their families or friends during holiday periods

☐ Not applicable

☐ Don't know

Other (please specify)

3. What is your policy for ensuring the welfare of care leavers and other students remaining in residences/halls during holiday periods?

☐ We do not have a specific policy

☐ During holiday periods, we try to ensure some contact with students remaining in residences/halls

☐ Not applicable

☐ Don't know

Other (please specify)

Emotional support for care leavers

1. How does your institution ensure the emotional wellbeing of its care leavers? (select all that apply)

- ☐ We take active steps to maintain regular contact with students who inform us they are care leavers via a named member of the welfare staff, e.g. through email or face to face contact
- ☐ We provide care leavers with a named contact amongst the welfare staff and encourage the student to discuss any issues with them
- ☐ We make a point of ensuring that care leavers are made aware of the support and guidance available to students about emotional issues
- ☐ We take the same steps for ensuring the emotional wellbeing of care leavers as we do for other students
- ☐ Don't know

Other (please specify)

The Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark

1. Has your institution been awarded, or is it in the process of applying for the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark?

☐ Yes

☐ No

Institutions holding or applying for the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark

1. What do you think were the main reasons for your institution applying for the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark? (select all that apply)

- ☐ We recognised care leavers as a group with specific support needs
- ☐ As a means of attracting more care leavers to our institution
- ☐ Another institution in our area had been awarded the Quality Mark
- ☐ Similar institutions to ours had been awarded the Quality Mark
- ☐ It offered recognition for the support we were already providing to care leavers
- ☐ To learn how to meet care leavers' needs more effectively
- ☐ Don't know

Other (please specify)

2. What new provision has your institution introduced, or is in the process of introducing, as a direct result of applying for the Quality Mark? (select all that apply)

- ☐ Outreach work aimed at care leavers
- ☐ Establishing links with local authorities
- ☐ Bursaries specifically for care leavers
- ☐ 365 day accommodation
- ☐ Mentoring schemes
- ☐ Obtaining feedback from service users
- ☐ No new provision has been/is being introduced

Other (please specify)

3. Which element of provision introduced so far under the Quality Mark has been the most difficult to implement? (select one answer)

- ☐ Outreach work aimed at care leavers
- ☐ Establishing links with local authorities
- ☐ Bursaries specifically for care leavers
- ☐ 365 day accommodation
- ☐ Mentoring schemes
- ☐ Obtaining feedback from services users
- ☐ We are still in the process of applying for the Quality Mark

Other (please specify)

4. Do you think that holding the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark has a positive impact on the experiences of care leavers at your institution?

- ☐ Yes definately
- ☐ Yes probably
- ☐ Not sure
- ☐ Probably not
- ☐ Definately not

5. Do you think that holding the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark has a positive impact indirectly on the experiences of other disadvantaged students at your institution?

- ☐ Yes definately
- ☐ Yes probably
- ☐ Not sure
- ☐ Probably not
- ☐ Definately not

Institutions not holding or in the process of applying for the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark

1. What do you think are the main reasons why your institution has not applied for the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark? (select all that apply)

- ☐ We are currently considering applying
- ☐ Senior staff are not convinced of the benefits of the Quality Mark
- ☐ It would not add anything new to our existing provision
- ☐ We already have good provision for care leavers
- ☐ We have not explored what is involved in applying for the Quality Mark
- ☐ Don't know

Other (please specify)

2. How aware are you of what an institution is required to show before it is awarded the Quality Mark?

- ☐ Very aware
- ☐ Quite aware
- ☐ Not sure
- ☐ Not very aware
- ☐ Not at all aware

Liaising with local authorities about care leavers

1. Are you currently liaising with any local authorities in respect of existing or prospective students from care backgrounds?

☐ Currently, we are not liaising with any local authorities and have not liaised in the past

☐ Currently, we are not liaising with any local authorities but have done so in the past

☐ Currently, we are liaising with local authorities about students from care backgrounds

☐ Don't know

Other (please specify)

2. Which local authorities are you currently liaising with?

☐ None

☐ Don't know

Names of local authorities

3. Which of the following best describes how initial contact takes place between your institution and local authorities? (select one answer)

☐ Local authorities usually contact us before or during the application process to discuss a particular care leaver

☐ Local authorities usually contact us once a care leaver has received an offer of a place

☐ Local authorities usually contact us once a care leaver has received their exam results

☐ Local authorities usually contact us once a care leaver has started their course

☐ We usually make contact with the local authority

☐ It has differed on each occasion

☐ Unable to specify as we have had very little or no experience of liaison with local authorities

Other (please specify)

4. Which of the following best describes the usual level of ongoing contact between your institution and local authorities in relation to care leavers? (select one answer)

- ☐ Regular contact is usually maintained with a local authority throughout a care leaver's studies
- ☐ Contact is usually made as and when necessary throughout a care leaver's studies
- ☐ Contact is rarely maintained with a local authority throughout a care leaver's studies
- ☐ Usually, no contact is maintained with the local authority throughout a care leaver's studies
- ☐ Unable to specify as we have had very little or no contact with local authorities
- ☐ Don't know

Other (please specify)

5. Who usually maintains the contact between your institution and the local authority throughout a care leaver's studies? (select one answer)

- ☐ We usually maintain contact with the local authority
- ☐ Local authorities usually contact us throughout a care leaver's studies
- ☐ It varies as to who maintains contact throughout a care leaver's studies
- ☐ Usually contact is not maintained
- ☐ Unable to specify as we have had very little or no contact with local authorities
- ☐ Don't know

Other (please specify)

6. How much do you think care leavers at your institution would benefit from increased liaison between you and their local authorities?

- ☐ A lot
- ☐ Slightly
- ☐ Not sure
- ☐ Not at all

Other (please specify)

End of Part 2

Please click on 'Finish' to submit your responses

Thank you

Appendix 2:

**Internet questionnaire sent to
disadvantaged students, including
care leavers**

Overcoming by Degrees: Student Survey

1. Looking at students' experiences of HE and access to support services

1. Please complete this survey if you answer YES to any of the following three statements: -

	Yes	No
I have been looked after by my local authority for at least three months since I was 14 years old and was being looked after by them at some time while I was aged 16 or 17. (The three month period does not need to be continuous, but instead can be made up of several shorter periods.)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am receiving a FULL Maintenance Grant or Special Support Grant from the government to help with the cost of university or college (i.e. a non repayable grant rather than any student loans you may have)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am the first person from my immediate family (Parents, brothers, sisters or grandparents) to enter higher education	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Overcoming by Degrees: Student Survey

2. About this survey

What is this survey about?

This survey is part of a research study looking at the different types of support being offered to students at university or college to discover how effective that support actually is. In particular, the study is focusing on the support available to young people who have been in local authority care, and comparing this with the experiences of students from low income backgrounds and students who are the first in their families to enter higher education.

What does this survey involve?

The survey asks about your experiences and views on using the student support services at your college or university. Student support includes any type of support offered to students at your institution. Possible examples include: -

- FINANCIAL support (finding out about eligibility for bursaries, advice on budgeting)
- ACADEMIC support (having a personal tutor, getting help to plan revision)
- EMOTIONAL support (receiving counselling, having a named person to discuss non- academic issues with)
- PRACTICAL support (arranging vacation accommodation, receiving careers advice, finding part-time work)

PRIZE DRAW

Every student returning a completed survey can choose to enter a prize draw for the chance to win gift vouchers (first prize £100 Amazon vouchers, second prize £20 GAME vouchers.)

Are my responses confidential?

Your responses to this internet survey will only be seen by the researcher. Your university or college will not see the completed survey and will not know that you have responded. Your identity will not be revealed in any report resulting from this research. Completing this survey is entirely optional and will take approximately 10 minutes to complete.

Thank you very much for your time.

Georgia Hyde-Dryden
PhD Researcher
Loughborough University

Overcoming by Degrees: Student Survey

3. Basic information

* 1. How old were you on the day you started your course?

* 2. How old are you now?

3. Are you male or female?

☐ Male

☐ Female

4. How would you describe your ethnicity?

☐ White

☐ Mixed

☐ Indian

☐ Pakistani

☐ Bangladeshi

☐ Other Asian

☐ Black Caribbean

☐ Black African

☐ Black Other

☐ Chinese

☐ Any other ethnic group

☐ I prefer not to answer

* 5. What is the name of your university or college?

* 6. What year of the course are you currently in?

☐ 1st

☐ 2nd

☐ 3rd

☐ 4th

☐ 5th

☐ 6th

Other (please specify)

Overcoming by Degrees: Student Survey

* 7. How long is your course?

8. Are you studying full or part-time?

☐ Full-time

☐ Part-time

* 9. What type of qualification are you studying for?

☐ Advanced Nursing Diploma

☐ Cert HE

☐ Degree

☐ Diploma in Nursing & Midwifery

☐ Dip HE

☐ Foundation Degree

☐ Graduate Diploma in Nursing

☐ HNC

☐ HND

Other (please specify)

* 10. What is the title of your course?

11. Please tick YES or NO to the following statements:-

	Yes	No
I have a disability	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am currently applying for asylum in the UK	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have been granted asylum in the UK	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Overcoming by Degrees: Student Survey

4. Making the decision to enter higher education

1. Why did you decide to enter higher education? (Please select all that apply)

- ☐ To qualify for a particular career/ job
- ☐ To generally improve my career prospects
- ☐ To increase my future earning capacity
- ☐ Because other family members went to university
- ☐ I enjoy learning
- ☐ Other people encouraged me to apply
- ☐ To delay starting in employment
- ☐ I don't know

Other (please specify)

2. Who encouraged you to enter higher education? (Please select all that apply)

- ☐ My school/ a teacher
- ☐ My parents or carers
- ☐ Other family members
- ☐ My friends
- ☐ My social worker or local authority personal advisor
- ☐ Nobody

Other (please specify)

Overcoming by Degrees: Student Survey

3. Where did you get advice on which college or university to apply to? (Please select all that apply)

- ☐ Connexions advisors
- ☐ My teachers or a careers advisors
- ☐ My parents or carers
- ☐ My social worker or local authority personal advisor
- ☐ My friends
- ☐ I didn't get any advice

Other (please specify)

4. When you were at school, which of the following activities did you take part in to get a taste of higher education? (Please select all that apply)

- ☐ Summer schools
- ☐ Mentoring schemes
- ☐ Taster days
- ☐ Presentations by staff or students from universities or colleges
- ☐ University/ college open days
- ☐ Events or schemes to inform young people in local authority care about higher education
- ☐ I did not take part in any activities

Other (please specify)

Overcoming by Degrees: Student Survey

5. Which of the following factors MOST influenced your choice of college/ university?
(Please tick the ONE answer that best applies)

- ☐ That the college/ university had a particular course on offer
- ☐ The university/ college was close to my home/ I would not need to move away from my home town
- ☐ The cost of taking different courses/ attending different institutions
- ☐ The facilities offered by different institutions, e.g. academic, social or sporting facilities
- ☐ The university/ college offered me a good level of student support
- ☐ The university/ college had the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark
- ☐ A nearby university/ college was running a scheme encouraging local young people to apply to them

Other (please specify)

Overcoming by Degrees: Student Survey

5. Your awareness of student support services

1. Do you know if any of the following services are available at your university/ college to help with your ACADEMIC work? (Please select all that you are aware of)

- ☐ Support for students with dyslexia
- ☐ Personal tutors
- ☐ Extra support with maths, statistics or IT
- ☐ Courses to improve study skills (e.g. using the internet, essay writing, planning coursework)

Other (please specify)

2. How did you hear about the above support? (Please select all the answers that apply)

- ☐ From the information sent to freshers before my course started
- ☐ Someone from student support contacted me directly to discuss it
- ☐ From presentations given by student support to all new students
- ☐ From publicity, e.g. the university/ college website, posters, emails
- ☐ From my personal tutor at university/ college
- ☐ From my local authority personal advisor/ social worker
- ☐ From other students
- ☐ I contacted student support myself to find out
- ☐ I don't know about the support available to help with my academic work
- ☐ I can't remember how I heard about it

Other (please specify)

Overcoming by Degrees: Student Survey

3. Do you know if any of the following services are available at your university/ college to help you deal with FINANCIAL issues? (Please select all that you are aware of)

- ☐ Advice on eligibility for grants and bursaries
- ☐ Advice on how to manage my finances
- ☐ Advice on dealing with debt
- ☐ Hardship or emergency loans

Other (please specify)

4. How did you hear about the above support? (Please select all the answers that apply)

- ☐ From the information sent to freshers before my course started
- ☐ Someone from student support contacted me directly to discuss it
- ☐ From presentations given by student support to all new students
- ☐ From publicity, e.g. the university/ college website, posters, emails
- ☐ From my personal tutor at university/ college
- ☐ From my local authority personal advisor/ social worker
- ☐ From other students
- ☐ I contacted student support myself to find out
- ☐ I don't know about the support available to help with my academic work
- ☐ I can't remember how I heard about it

Other (please specify)

Overcoming by Degrees: Student Survey

5. Do you know if any of the following services are available at your university/ college to help you deal with EMOTIONAL issues? (Please select all that you are aware of)

- ☐ Counselling
- ☐ Chaplaincy/ support for people of different faiths
- ☐ Mentoring by other students
- ☐ Having a named member of the student support/ welfare staff to discuss problems with
- ☐ Having a named member of the academic staff in my department to discuss non-academic issues with
- ☐ A telephone helpline offering emotional support to students

Other (please specify)

6. How did you hear about the above support? (Please select all the answers that apply)

- ☐ From the information sent to freshers before my course started
- ☐ Someone from student support contacted me directly to discuss it
- ☐ From presentations given by student support to all new students
- ☐ From publicity, e.g. the university/ college website, posters, emails
- ☐ From my personal tutor at university/ college
- ☐ From my local authority personal advisor/ social worker
- ☐ From other students
- ☐ I contacted student support myself to find out
- ☐ I don't know about the support available to help with my academic work
- ☐ I can't remember how I heard about it

Other (please specify)

Overcoming by Degrees: Student Survey

7. Do you know if any of the following services are available at your university/ college to help you deal with PRACTICAL issues? (Please select all that you are aware of)

- ☐ University/ college accommodation for students during vacation periods
- ☐ Helpdesk or student advice office
- ☐ Mentoring by other students
- ☐ Having a named member of the student support/ welfare staff to discuss problems with
- ☐ Having a named member of the academic staff in my department to discuss non-academic issues with

Other (please specify)

8. How did you hear about the above support? (Please select all the answers that apply)

- ☐ From the information sent to freshers before my course started
- ☐ Someone from student support contacted me directly to discuss it
- ☐ From presentations given by student support to all new students
- ☐ From publicity, e.g. the university/ college website, posters, emails
- ☐ From my personal tutor at university/ college
- ☐ From my local authority personal advisor/ social worker
- ☐ From other students
- ☐ I contacted student support myself to find out
- ☐ I don't know about the support available to help with my academic work
- ☐ I can't remember how I heard about it

Other (please specify)

Overcoming by Degrees: Student Survey

6. Your use of student support services

1. What types of financial help have you received from your university/ college?
(Please select all that apply)

- ☐ Bursary
- ☐ Bursary specifically for care leavers
- ☐ Scholarship
- ☐ Emergency/ hardship funds
- ☐ I have not received any financial help from my university/ college
- ☐ I don't know

Other (please specify)

2. Which of the following support services have you used to help deal with
ACADEMIC issues? (Please select all that apply)

- ☐ I have received support with dyslexia
- ☐ I have discussed problems/concerns with my personal tutor
- ☐ I have had extra support to help me with my studies, e.g. extra support for maths or statistics
- ☐ I have attended courses to improve my general study skills (e.g. using the internet, essay writing, planning coursework)
- ☐ I have not used any support services to help with academic issues

Other (please specify)

3. Which of the following support services have you used to help deal with
FINANCIAL issues? (Please select all that apply)

- ☐ Advice on eligibility for grants and bursaries
- ☐ Advice on how to manage my finances
- ☐ Advice on dealing with debt
- ☐ Hardship or emergency loans
- ☐ I have not used any support services to help with financial issues

Other (please specify)

Overcoming by Degrees: Student Survey

4. Which of the following support services have you used to help deal with EMOTIONAL issues? (Please select all that apply)

- ☐ I have spoken to a counsellor
- ☐ I have received support from the Chaplaincy/ faith groups at my institution
- ☐ I have a student mentor whom I have talked to
- ☐ I have a named member of the student support/ welfare staff whom I have talked to
- ☐ I have a named member of the academic staff in my department whom I have talked to
- ☐ I have talked to someone on a telephone helpline run by my university/ college
- ☐ I have not used any support services to help with emotional issues

Other (please specify)

5. Which of the following support services have you used to help deal with PRACTICAL issues? (Please select all that apply)

- ☐ I have arranged accommodation at university/ college during vacation periods
- ☐ I have visited the helpdesk or student advice office to discuss practical issues
- ☐ I have discussed practical issues with my student mentor
- ☐ I have a named member of the student support/ welfare staff whom I have discussed practical issues with
- ☐ I have a named member of the academic staff in my department whom I have discussed practical issues with
- ☐ I have not used any support services to help with practical issues

Other (please specify)

6. What types of additional support for students do you think would be useful at your college/ university? (This could be support with any aspect of student life)

Overcoming by Degrees: Student Survey

7. Overall, do you think you have been given enough support by your university or college? (This could be support to deal with academic, financial, emotional or practical issues)

(Select one answer)

☐ Yes, I have been given enough support

☐ I would prefer a bit more support

☐ I would prefer a lot more support

☐ I need support, but am not being given any

☐ I haven't needed any support

☐ I don't know

Other (please specify)

8. How much of a positive effect has the support given by your university/ college had on your experience of higher education? (Please select one answer)

☐ It has had a very positive effect on my experience

☐ It has had a fairly positive effect on my experience

☐ It has had no positive effect on my experience

☐ I'm not sure

Overcoming by Degrees: Student Survey

7. The Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark

1. How aware are you of the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark? (Please select one answer only)

☐ I have heard of it and know why it is awarded to universities and colleges of higher education

☐ I have heard of it, but do not know why it is awarded to universities and colleges of higher education

☐ I have never heard of it before

2. When you were choosing which universities/ colleges to apply to, how important was it that they had been awarded the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark? (Please select one answer only)

☐ Very important

☐ Quite important

☐ Not very important

☐ Not at all important

Overcoming by Degrees: Student Survey

8. Care leavers in higher education

* 1. At the beginning of this questionnaire, did you answer YES to the statement:-

I have been looked after by my local authority for at least three months since I was 14 years old and was being looked after by them at some time while I was aged 16 or 17.

☐ Yes

☐ No

Overcoming by Degrees: Student Survey

9. Being a care leaver in higher education

1. Have you informed your university/ college that you are a care leaver? (Either directly or through your UCAS application form)

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ I'm not sure

2. Are you aware of whether your college/ university offers any financial support specifically for students who have been in care?

☐ Yes

☐ No

☐ I don't know

3. Before starting your course, how much did you know about the practical and financial support that your LOCAL AUTHORITY would provide you with?

☐ My personal advisor/ social worker discussed with me in detail how much support I would receive

☐ I was given some idea of how much support I would receive

☐ Nobody discussed with me what support I would receive

☐ I cannot remember what I was told about support

Other (please specify)

4. Since starting your course, have you received all of the support you were expecting from your local authority? (E.g. financial, emotional or practical support)

☐ I received more support than I was expecting

☐ I received the support I was expecting

☐ I received some of the support I was expecting

☐ I didn't get any of the support I was expecting

☐ I wasn't expecting any support

☐ I don't know

Other (please specify)

Overcoming by Degrees: Student Survey

5. Before starting your course, how much did you know about the practical and financial support that your UNIVERSITY/ COLLEGE would provide you with?

☐ My personal advisor/ social worker discussed with me in detail how much support I would receive

☐ I was given some idea of how much support I would receive

☐ Nobody discussed with me what support I would receive

☐ I cannot remember what I was told about support

Other (please specify)

6. Since starting your course, have you received all of the support you were expecting from your university/ college? (E.g. financial, emotional or practical support)

☐ I received more support than I was expecting

☐ I received the support I was expecting

☐ I received some of the support I was expecting

☐ I didn't get any of the support I was expecting

☐ I wasn't expecting any support

☐ I don't know

Other (please specify)

Overcoming by Degrees: Student Survey

10.

1. In the next stage of this study, the researcher will be meeting with a number of the students completing the survey to talk more about their views and experiences of higher education. (The researcher will agree a convenient date and time with people to meet at their own college or university campuses)

Would you be willing to meet with the researcher to talk more about your experiences and views?

☐ Yes (Please enter your contact details in the box below)

☐ No

Contact details (Name, email address and mobile number)

2. If you want to be entered into the prize draw for the Amazon or GAME vouchers, please enter your email address in the box below so that you can be contacted if you are a winner.

Appendix 3:
Question guide for interviews with
HEI staff

Interview Questions– Widening Participation Staff

Confidentiality

Types of support on offer

How many care leavers do you currently have?

- 1 Can you outline any outreach /aspiration raising work involving looked after children?
- 2 What types of support do you currently offer to care leavers

(i.e. a named staff contact, financial support)
- 3 Is any support aimed exclusively at care leavers?

Process of providing support

- 4 Can you talk me through what happens when a student or prospective student discloses that they are a care leaver?
- 5 Is there a process for reviewing the needs of care leavers throughout their time at []?

- Can you describe it?
- 6 Which types of support for care leavers have been most difficult to develop or implement?

- Why has it been so difficult?

- 7 How easy has it been to secure the funding for provision aimed at care leavers?

- Why is that?

Staff awareness

- 8 How aware do you think the staff are generally about care leavers and the issues they face?
- 9 How supportive have the executive/ senior managers been of your work to support care leavers?

Awareness of support amongst care leavers

- 10 How do you make looked after children who are thinking about university aware of your support package?
- 11 How do you make care leavers aware of the support available when they actually start at []? i.e. the care leaver bursary

Role of multi agency working, i.e. collaboration with Las and schools

- 12 Can you tell me about any experience you have had of liaising with local authorities about care leavers?
- 13 Do you think local authorities and universities have a clear understanding of each others roles and responsibilities?
- 14 How much contact do you have with other universities or colleges about care leavers?

How will support for care leavers develop

- 15 How do you envisage your support for care leavers developing over the next few years?

For institutions with the FBTQM

- 16 How do you think holding the Quality Mark has changed the way you support your care leavers?
- 17 Do you think you would be providing the same level of support if you did not have the Quality Mark?
- 18 Has holding the Quality Mark helped get the university's executive/ senior management on board with supporting care leavers?
- 19 Has holding the Quality Mark had any effect on provision for other disadvantaged students?

Definition of care leaver

- 20 What definition of care leaver do you use to assess students' eligibility to support, i.e. financial support ?
- 21 Is there anything else you would like to add?

For institutions without the FBTQM

- 16 Do you think holding the Quality Mark would have any impact on your provision for care leavers?
- 17 Do you have any plans to apply?
- 18 Has the possibility of applying been discussed?

Definition of care leaver

- 19 What definition of care leaver do you use to assess students' eligibility to support, i.e. financial support ?
- 20 Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix 4:

**Question guide for interviews with
local authority staff**

Interview Questions – Local Authority Staff

Introductory questions

Confidentiality

To begin, how many care leavers do you have in HE at the moment?

Can you give me a brief outline of the structure of your leaving care team?

Aspiration raising

Has your local authority been involved in any aspiration raising events to get young people to think about HE?

Is your local authority doing anything to raise the profile of HE amongst **carers**?

Does your authority have anything similar to the virtual school/head responsible for looked after children?

The university application process

What types of support are care leavers given to complete the application process for HE?

Who give that support?

What information are care leavers given about the package of support you offer?

Support package

Can you outline the package of support your local authority gives to young people going to university?

Will the new £2,000 bursary be paid to care leavers **in addition** to the financial support you are already giving?

Ongoing support/contact

How much contact do you generally have with care leavers once they start university?

In practice, do you have any opportunity to review whether they are getting the right support?

Liaison with HEIs

What has been your experience of working with universities and colleges of higher education to support care leavers?

Have you had any particularly good experiences of liaison?

What impact does knowing the exact support available at a university or college have on your ability to support a care leaver in higher education?

How much do you know about the support for care leavers offered by the universities and colleges in your area?

How do you usually find out what universities and colleges offer?

How would you like liaison with universities and colleges to work?

How far do you feel higher education institutions understand your role and duties towards care leavers?

How well do you think higher education institutions understand the issues faced by care leavers?

FBT Quality Mark

Are you aware of the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark?

Do you make care leavers aware of universities holding the quality mark?

How much priority are you able to give care leavers going to university compared to other care leavers?

Future developments

How do you see the support given to care leavers entering HE developing in future?

Is there anything you want to add?

Appendix 5:

Participant information sheet

‘Overcoming by Degrees’

Participant Information Sheet

What is the background to this research?

Over the last few years, it has become increasingly recognised that the proportion of young people leaving local authority care to go into higher education is well below that of the population as a whole. To address this, various measures have been introduced by government, universities, colleges and other organisations intended to encourage and support more care leavers to enter higher education. In particular, the Frank Buttle Trust has developed a Quality Mark that is awarded to higher education institutions who demonstrate their commitment to supporting care leavers.

What is the purpose of this research?

To look at what impact these support measures are having on the lives of both care leavers and other students with the aim of improving the experiences of future students. This will involve:

- finding out the types of support being offered to students in higher education generally and to care leavers specifically
- exploring how these support measures work in practice through the eyes of staff and students
- exploring how students would like support services to be delivered
- considering whether the introduction of measures intended to support care leavers could be having an indirect positive effect on the experiences of students from other backgrounds
- considering how far the needs of care leavers overlap with the needs of other students already targeted by student support services

How is data being collected?

- An internet survey of student support staff in colleges of higher education and universities across England to find out what support is being provided.
- Telephone interviews with 24 student support staff, and 16 social workers working with care leavers to explore how support is provided in greater depth.
- Gathering existing data and statistical information on support services.
- An internet survey of undergraduates in England for completion by care leavers, first generation students and students receiving full government maintenance grants to find out peoples' experiences and views of student support.
- Face to face interviews with a total of 48 students: 24 students with care backgrounds and 24 first generation students, or students receiving full government maintenance grants. The interviews will build on the survey responses to explore peoples' views and experiences in greater depth.

What does participating involve?

You have already completed the internet survey and are now being asked to take part in a face to face interview. In the interview, you will be asked to talk more about your own experience of higher education and your views and experiences of the support available to students. Examples of some of the areas that will be covered include: what support you had when choosing where to apply; how you have found the process of accessing support; the types of support you have found useful and how you think your experiences could have been improved.

In order to ensure that an accurate record of the interview is made, I would like to record the interview electronically. The recording will be used for no other purpose than transcribing notes. However, please note that you are free to decline this request.

Your college or university will not be informed that you are taking part and your identity will not be revealed in any report resulting from this research.

Finally, you are under no obligation to participate in the research and have the right to withdraw at any stage without having to explain your reasons for doing so.

Researcher details

Researcher: Georgia Hyde-Dryden
Email: G.R.Hyde-Dryden@lboro.ac.uk
Address: Centre for Child and Family Research, Department of Social Science, Loughborough University, LE11 3TU

Research Supervisor: Professor Harriet Ward
Email: H.Ward@lboro.ac.uk
Address: Centre for Child and Family Research, Department of Social Science, Loughborough University, LE11 3TU

If you should at any time wish to make a complaint, please contact the Secretary to the Ethical Advisory Committee at Loughborough University.

Appendix 6:
Question guide for interviews with
care leavers

Interview Questions – Care Leavers

Start of interview:

10 Informed consent form

11 Confirm that by student support I mean any type of support they have received from anyone at their university. Throughout university i.e. Aim Higher, Connexions, Foster Carers, PA/Social Worker, Family/Friends or employment etc?

A. Educational background

1. What qualifications do you have?
2. [Ask participants to elaborate where they have not taken a GCSE/A Level route or have not entered university directly from school]

B. Care background

1. How long have you spent in care in total? Is this through local authority or private fostering arrangements with friends and family?
2. What circumstances led to you being in care?
3. How many placements and moves have you made (including returns home) between going into care and starting university?
4. How many school/college moves have you made?
5. Where were you living when you applied for university? (With foster family, residential home, extended family, independent living in council flat /housing association property, hostel, lodgings)

6. Were you still there when you moved to university?
7. If you have a council/ housing association flat do you have to live there during the university term?
8. How far is your university from where you are live during term time?
9. Where do you live during university holidays?

C. Making decisions about going to university

[Questions 1 - 6 for students who confirmed in the questionnaire that they took part in aspiration raising events/ open days whilst at school]

[Refer to the event/ open day that the interviewee took part in.]

1. What encouraged you at go to the event?
2. Who went with you?
3. Can you tell me a little bit about that event, i.e. what did it involve?
4. Did the event have an effect on your decision about university? In what way?
- 2 Looking back, do you wish you had made a different choice about university? - What would you do differently?

[Questions 7 - 10 for students who confirmed in the questionnaire that they did not take part in any aspiration raising events/ open days whilst at school]

7. Why did you choose not to attend the events?
8. Do you think going to an event or open day would have been useful to you?

9. Looking back, do you wish you had made a different choice about university?
- What would you do differently?

D. Applying to university/ college

1. Once you had selected the universities you wanted to apply to, did anyone help you complete the UCAS form and apply for funding?
- Who?
2. How did they help?
3. Were there any parts of the application form you found difficult to complete?
Which parts?
4. How did you deal with this?
5. Did you have any interviews for university places?
10 Who helped you prepare for them?
11 Did anyone go with you?
12 How important was that support?/ Would you have liked someone to go with you?
6. Did you get all the support you wanted from your social worker/ personal adviser / anyone else when you were applying for university?
13 Who helped you?
14 How did they help you?
15 What more could they have done to help you?

E. Finding out what support you would receive from your local authority

1. Once you decided to go to university, how did you find out about the support package that your local authority would give you?
- Who explained? When?
 - How clearly was the support package explained?

- Is there any way your local authority could have better informed you about the support package?

F. Your experience of support at university

[Questions 1 - 9 for students who have disclosed their care backgrounds to their universities]

1. Can you explain what happened once your university was told that you were a care leaver?

Did anyone from the university contact you to discuss the range of support they offered? Who?

Were you given a named contact?

How much help were you given to decide if you needed any support?

2. What types of support did you receive?

How much help were you given to actually arrange that support?

Have you received all of the support that you needed?

Could you get more support if you needed it?

3. Do you know if there was any contact between your local authority and university to discuss the support they were both giving you?

Do you think their working together helped make your experience of university more positive?

In what way?

4. How much do you think it matters whether university staff have any understanding of what it's like to be a care leaver in higher education?

In your opinion what effect does it have on the support they offer?

5. Focusing on financial support, what are all your different sources of money whilst you are at university?

- Student loans/ grants
- Bursaries/ scholarships/ money from your university
- Money from your local authority
- Money from family/ relatives
- Part- or full-time job
- Free or subsidised accommodation

6. Did you get all the financial support you were promised?

What didn't you receive/what was extra?

7. Was your financial support confirmed and arrangements made for you to receive the money in good time before the start of your course?

8. How have you found living on that money?

Has it been enough?

Did you receive it at the right times to pay your outgoings? (e.g. accommodation, travelling, food, going out, field trips)

9. Were there any grants or bursaries you could have applied for, but decided not to?

What were they?

Why did you decide not to apply? E.g. Long or confusing application process/ conditions attached to getting the money/ you didn't think you would be successful/ it would affect other grants or bursary payments that you receive.

Would anything make you apply for the money if it was still available?

[Questions 10 -15 for students who have not disclosed to their university that they are a care leaver]

10. You said in the questionnaire that you received [X] support. Did you get the opportunity to talk to anyone at your university about the types of support that might be useful to you, or did you decide for yourself what you needed?

Who did you talk to?

Was it useful?

Why did you decide not to speak to anyone at your university about support?

Have you spoken to anyone in student support since you started university?

What did you contact them about?

Was it useful?

11. Focusing on financial support, what are all your different sources of money whilst you are at university?

- Student loans/ grants
- Bursaries/ scholarships/ money from your university
- Money from your local authority
- Money from family/ relatives
- Part- or full - time job
- Free or subsidised accommodation

12. Did you get all the financial support you were promised?

What did/n't you receive?

13. Was your financial support confirmed and were arrangements made for you to receive the money in good time before the start of your course?

14. How have you found living on that money?

Has it been enough?

Did you receive it at the right times to pay your outgoings? (e.g. accommodation, travelling, food, going out, field trips)

15. Were there any grants or bursaries you could have applied for, but decided not to?

What were they?

Why did you decide not to apply? E.g. Long/ confusing application process, conditions attached to getting the money, you didn't think you would be successful, it would affect other grants or bursary payments that you receive.

Would anything make you apply for the money if it was still available?

[Questions 16 – 21 for all students]

16. Can you describe any positive experiences you have had of using student support?
17. In your opinion, what are the most important things about positive student support?
18. What would be the most effective way for your university to inform you about the student support they offer? i.e. by email, contacting you before you start, through its website?
19. Have you experienced any particular difficulties getting the support you have needed at university?
What were these?
How have you dealt with this?
20. Is there any way that you think student support at your university could be improved?
by providing a particular service
in the way that it provides support
in the way it advertises its services
21. How often are you in communication with your social worker/personal adviser now you are at university? E.g. by email, text, face to face, telephone...

Does that give you an opportunity to review any support you are getting?

[Questions 22 – 25 for students who have not disclosed their care backgrounds to their universities]

22. Why did you decide not to tell your university that you had been in care?
23. Is there anything that would make you consider telling the university about your care background?
24. If you were told when you applied to university about funding or support available specifically for care leavers, might that have affected your decision?
25. If your university made it clear when you applied that it would be your choice how much contact and support you would have with them, would that have affected your decision?

G. Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark

[Questions 1 - 2 for students indicating in the questionnaire that they know about the FBTQM]

1. How did you hear about the FBTQM?
2. Did it affect your choice of university?

H. Closing questions

1. Is there anything else at all you would like to add?
2. We would like to do follow up interviews with care leavers in a year or two to see what people are doing after graduation. Would you be happy for us to contact you in the future to see if you would like to take part?

Appendix 7:

**Question guide for interviews with
disadvantaged students**

Interview Questions – Other students

Background

Educational background

What qualifications do you have?

[Ask participants to elaborate where they have not taken a GCSE/A Level route or have not come directly from school]

Care background

Have you ever been in care?

- When was that?
- How long were you in care for?
- Why was that?

Have you ever had a social worker?

- Why was that?

Making decisions about going to university

[Participants who confirmed in the questionnaire that they took part in aspiration arising events/ open days]

Can you tell me a little bit about that event, i.e. what did it involve?

Did you decide to go to the event yourself, or did someone else encourage you to go?

Did anyone go with you, e.g. parent, teacher, anyone else?

What effect did going have on your decisions about university?

- Why do you think it had no effect?

Looking back, do you wish you had made different choices about university, knowing what you know now?

How do you think your choices would be different?

[Participants who did not take part in any aspiration raising events/ events]

Did you choose not to go to any events or weren't you given the opportunity?

- Why did you choose not to go?

Do you think going to an event or open day would have been useful to you?

Looking back, do you wish you had made different choices about university, knowing what you know now?

How do you think your choices would be different?

Applying to university/ college

Once you had selected the universities you wanted to apply to, who helped you complete the UCAS form and apply for funding?

How did your parents/teacher/ anyone else help?

Did you have any interviews for university places?

- Who helped you prepare for them?
- Did anyone go with you? Who?

- How important was that support?/ Would you have liked someone to go with you?

Your experience of support at university

You said in the questionnaire that you received [X] support. Did you talk to anyone at your university about the types of support that might be useful to you, or did you decide for yourself what you needed?

- Who did you talk to?
- How did that go?
- Why did you decide not to speak to student support?

Have you spoken to anyone in student support since you started university?

- What did you contact them about?
- How did that go?

Focusing on financial support, what are all your different sources of money whilst you are at university?

- Student loans/ grants
- Bursaries/ scholarships/ money from your university
- Money from parents/ relatives
- Part-time job
- Free or subsidised accommodation
- Money from a charity/ other organisation

Did you get all the financial support you were promised?

- What didn't you receive/what was extra/?

Was your financial support confirmed in good time, i.e. before you started your course?

How have you found living on that money?

- Has it been enough?
- Did you receive it at the right times to pay your outgoings? (e.g. accommodation, travelling, food, going out, field trips)

Were there any grants or bursaries you could have applied for, but decided not to?

- What were they?
- Why did you decide not to apply? E.g. Long/ confusing application process, conditions attached to getting the money, you didn't think you would be successful, it would affect other grants or bursary payments that you receive.
- Would anything make you apply for the money if it was still available?

Can you describe any particularly positive experiences you have had of using student support?

For you, what are the most important things about good student support?

For you personally, what would be the most effective way for your university to inform you about the student support it offers? i.e. by email, contacting you before you start, through its website?

Have you experienced any particular difficulties getting the support you have needed at university?

- What were these?
- How have you dealt with them?

Is there any way that you think student support at your university could be improved?

- By providing a particular service
- in the way that it provides support
- in the way it advertises its services

FBTQM

[For students indicating in the questionnaire that they know about the FBTQM]

How did you hear about the FBTQM?

Did it affect your choice of university?

Closing questions

Is there anything else at all you would like to add?

Appendix 8:
Organisations represented on the
advisory group

Organisations/agencies represented on advisory group

AMOSSHE

Buttle UK

Office for Fair Access

Local authorities

The Mixed Economy Group of Colleges

Appendix 9:

Informed consent form

‘Overcoming by Degrees’ Exploring the impact of widening participation
measures designed to improve care leavers’ experiences of higher
education

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

(to be completed after Participant Information Sheet has been read)

The purpose and details of this study have been explained to me. I understand that this study is designed to further scientific knowledge and that all procedures have been approved by the Loughborough University Ethical Advisory Committee.

I have read and understood the information sheet and this consent form and have been given details of who to contact if I want to make a complaint.

I have had an opportunity to ask questions about my participation.

I understand that I do not have to take part in the study and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reasons. I may also require any data I have given to be destroyed.

I know that I can refuse to answer any or all of the questions and that I can stop the interview at any point.

I understand that everything I say will be confidential, unless I suggest that a crime is taking place or that a child or young person is at risk of harm. In these circumstances, I understand that it will be necessary for the interviewer to inform the appropriate authorities.

I agree to the interview being recorded, and that the recordings will be kept secure and destroyed at the end of the study. I know that all data will be kept under the terms of the data Protection Act 1998.

I agree to participate in this study.

Your name _____

Your signature _____

Signature of investigator _____

Date _____