

# Overcoming self-reliance and lack of expectation among care leavers in higher education in England : the role of inter-agency working

Autor(en): **Hyde-Dryden, Georgia**

Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Soziale Arbeit = Revue suisse de travail social**

Band (Jahr): - **(2014)**

Heft 16

PDF erstellt am: **17.07.2020**

Persistenter Link: <http://doi.org/10.5169/seals-832439>

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Georgia Hyde-Dryden

# Overcoming Self-reliance and Lack of Expectation among Care Leavers in Higher Education in England: The Role of Inter-agency Working

## Abstract

This paper reports on a study exploring care leavers' experiences of higher education in England. Although a range of support is available from local authorities and higher education institutions to care leavers, there is a tendency towards self-reliance and lack of expectation of being supported. The findings suggest that by recognising their respective strengths and weaknesses and working together, local authority and higher education staff can engage care leavers more effectively, increasing levels of expectation and reducing the need for self-reliance.

## Introduction

In recent years the education of looked after children and care leavers has received increasing attention as more is learned about the links between education, resilience and improved outcomes (Gilligan 2007; Jackson et al. 2010). In England, there is recognition that low educational attainment puts looked after children at risk of social exclusion, and there has been a push to introduce policy supporting and encouraging looked after children to pursue education beyond compulsory school age (Jackson/Cameron 2012). For example, the *Don't Move Me* campaign, run by the charity Fostering Network, led to the inclusion in the Children and Families Act 2014 of a duty on local authorities to allow young people to remain living with carers until the age of 21 rather than being forced to leave home aged 18. There has, however, been very little research undertaken to date concerning the experiences of care leavers remaining in education beyond compulsory school age, including those who reach higher education.

This paper draws on findings from a research study (Hyde-Dryden 2012), exploring care leavers' experiences of higher education in England and the support available to this group of students. The paper considers

how staff in local authorities and higher education institutions can work together to overcome a tendency among care leavers towards self-reliance and a lack of expectation of being supported whilst in higher education.

### **The English context**

The disparity between educational outcomes for care leavers and the wider population in England is widely acknowledged (Gilligan 2007; Jackson/Cameron 2012). National data on the educational attainment of looked after children, collected as part of an annual return submitted by all local authority children's services departments (n = 152) to the government, show that in 2003, six percent of care leavers aged 19 were in higher education. Over the last ten years, this participation rate has barely increased, remaining at a constant level of six or seven percent (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009; Department for Education 2013). Although a direct comparison cannot be made, in the academic year 2011/12, the number of 17 to 20 year olds in the general population entering higher education for the first time stood at 41% (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills 2013). This provides an indication of the gap between the rates of participation for care leavers and the population at large. However, a caveat to these figures is research suggesting that because of their pre-care and care experiences, many care leavers are not in a position to follow the traditional route of entering higher education aged 18, but are more likely to enter later as mature students (Duncalf 2010). As such, the actual percentage of care leavers experiencing higher education is likely to be higher than six or seven percent.

Over the last ten to fifteen years, government policy in England has developed, placing greater emphasis on the education of looked after children as a means of overcoming disadvantage, including policy intended to support care leavers entering higher education (Cameron 2007). For example, the Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 introduced a duty on local authorities to support young people making the transition from care into adulthood by providing advice and assistance up to the age of 21. Where care leavers are in education, this support continues up to the age of 25 or for as long as a young person is attending an agreed programme of study (Department for Education 2014a). The Children Act 2004 introduced a specific duty on local authorities to promote educational achievement as part of their wider obligation to promote the welfare of looked after children and more recently, the Children and Young Persons Act 2008 introduced a one off bursary payment of £2000 (approximately £2500), paya-

ble by local authorities to care leavers entering higher education. Under statutory guidance issued in July 2014, local authorities should also ensure that links are made with higher education institutions and “that care leavers are supported to find establishments that understand and work to meet the needs of looked after children and care leavers” (Department for Education 2014b, p. 17).

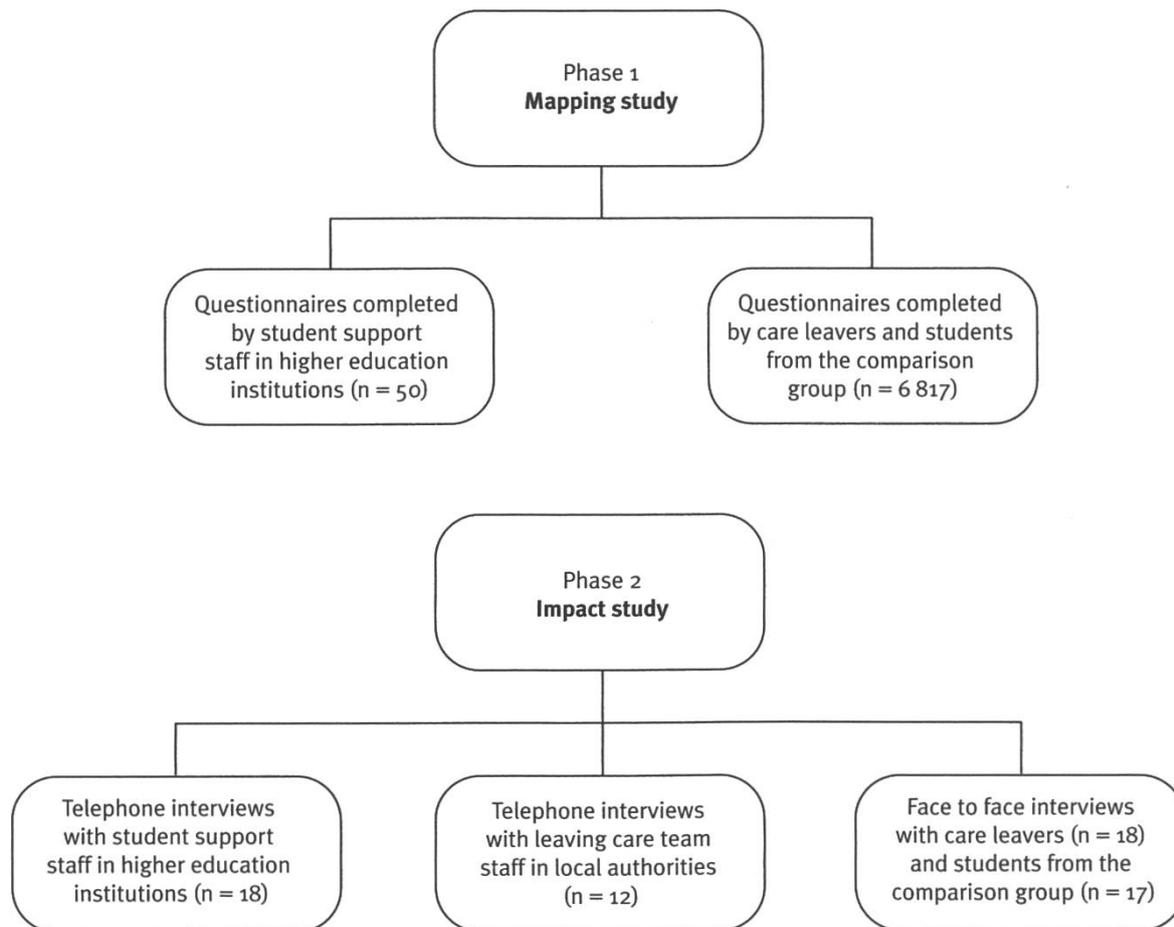
Research by Jackson and colleagues (2005) explored the experiences of three successive cohorts of 50 care leavers considering higher education in England and highlighted their key concerns including securing adequate funding; finding suitable term time and vacation accommodation; paying fees and budgeting. The study found that care leavers’ problems were more severe and more complex in nature than those faced by their peers, whilst they also lacked the emotional and practical support given to other students by their parents. The study findings led to the development of the Buttle UK Quality Mark, an award given to universities demonstrating an ongoing commitment to supporting care leavers. The government also acted upon a recommendation from the study to include a tick box on the application form used nationally to apply for higher education, enabling applicants to indicate that they were previously a looked after child (Institute of Education 2011).

## Methods

The overarching aims of the study, on which this paper is based, were to establish the range of support provision that should be available to care leavers in higher education in England and to explore the provision of that support in practice. The study used mixed methods and data were collected in two phases illustrated by Figure 1.

Phase one was a *mapping study* using online questionnaires to generate data about the availability and use of student support. The questionnaires were circulated for completion by student support staff at higher education institutions; care leavers; and a comparison group of students from low income families or those who were the first in their families to enter higher education. Questionnaires were circulated to 108 universities and 155 colleges of further education offering higher education qualifications across England ( $n=263$ ) identified through the national Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) website. Completed questionnaires were returned by a total of 50 higher education institutions (42 universities and 8 colleges of further education) and 6817 students. Of the student respondents, 200 (3%) described themselves as care leavers; 3554

Figure 1 Study design



Adapted from Hyde-Dryden, G., 2012, p.46.

(52%) were from low income families and 4 985 (73%) were first generation students.

Phase two was an *impact study* using telephone and face to face interviews to explore in greater depth the experiences of those receiving and providing support. A telephone interview was conducted with a member of staff from the student support team at 18 universities, and a member of the leaving care team at 12 local authorities. Students completing the questionnaire were asked to indicate whether they would be willing to participate in a face to face interview. Sixty-five of the 200 care leavers completing the questionnaire indicated they were willing to be interviewed, and all of these students were subsequently contacted and invited to participate. From a possible 65 interviews, 18 were secured. Fifteen (83%) of the sample were female and three (17%) male, with ages ranging from 19 to 37 years. First generation students and those from low income families

**Table 1** Overview of the topics covered by the mapping and impact studies

Instrument	Topics covered
<b>Mapping study</b>	
Questionnaires for student support staff	The range of support available to students generally; data collected on student support provision; the institution's approach to supporting care leavers; the range of support targeted at care leavers including financial, accommodation and emotional support; liaison with local authorities.
Questionnaires for care leavers and students from the comparison group	(For all students) Advice and support received when applying to enter higher education; awareness of the support available including financial, emotional and practical support; use of student support; and satisfaction with support. (For care leavers) Awareness prior to entering higher education of the support available to care leavers; and experiences of receiving support.
<b>Impact study</b>	
Interview guide for use with student support staff	Range of support provided to care leavers; process of support provision; raising awareness of support among care leavers; experiences of multi-agency working; plans for the future development of support; eligibility for care leaver support.
Interview guide for use with staff in local authorities	Aspiration raising with care leavers; support provided to care leavers when applying for higher education; support and contact with care leavers in higher education; liaison with higher education institutions; plans for the future development of support.
Interview guide for use with care leavers	Educational and care backgrounds; making decisions about higher education and applying; finding out about the local authority's support package; experiences of support in higher education.
Interview guide for use with students from the comparison group	Educational backgrounds; making decisions about higher education and applying; experiences of support in higher education.

were chosen to form the comparison group as they have been identified in national widening participation policy as disadvantaged groups requiring support in higher education. Examining overlaps in the data between care leavers and the comparison group helped to identify gaps in provision where care leavers require additional support. Seventeen students from the comparison group were interviewed face to face from those indicating that they were willing to participate further in the study. They were selected to match the characteristics of the care leaver sample as closely as possible, using data from the questionnaire about their gender, age, institution and subject of study. Fourteen (82%) of the sample described themselves as first generation students and 11 (65%) were in receipt of a full maintenance grant, which was used as an indicator of low income. Four students (24%) in the comparison group were male and 13 (76%) female. Their ages ranged from 18 to 55 years. When contacting the care leavers and students in the comparison group, 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.

Table 1 provides an overview of the main topics addressed by the questionnaires in the *mapping study* and interview guides in the *impact study*.

The questionnaire responses were analysed quantitatively using SPSS, and qualitative data from the interviews were analysed by hand using thematic analysis. The findings for the four participant groups (student support staff in higher education institutions; local authority staff; care leavers; and students from the comparison group) were then compared across a number of common themes, for example, awareness of support provision and accessing support. Data were collected between 2008 and 2010 and although not representative of all students in higher education and support providers, they capture a valuable snapshot of the situation across England. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Loughborough University's Ethics Sub Committee and from the Association of Directors of Children's Services.

## **The findings**

### *Self-reliance and lack of expectation*

When young people enter higher education in England, they traditionally move away from their family home and are therefore expected to possess a degree of self-reliance. However, the study found particularly high levels of self-reliance among the care leavers interviewed, combined with a lack of expectation that anyone would provide them with support.

*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)

Although these characteristics were seen to an extent among the students from the comparison group, the tendency was more striking among the care leavers interviewed. The data suggest that these characteristics stem from two sources: the belief that other people cannot be relied upon to provide support; and the desire to make a fresh start without everyone knowing about their care background.

A number of care leavers linked their self-reliance to events earlier in life.

*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 years)

Marie described how being around other children in the care system who were not achieving academically provided her with the drive to succeed, “I think watching that, I didn’t want to be part of that” (aged 21 years). Lack of expectation and a belief in the need for self-reliance appeared for some to be borne out of previous negative experiences, of being left unsupported or being let down by those expected to provide support.

Verity was very clear that she had been let down in the past:

Verity: *They said when they contacted me in my first year I could ask [my local authority] 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.*

Interviewer: *Why was that, that you didn’t want [support]?*

Verity: *Because they’d been useless. Completely useless.* (Verity, aged 20 years)

In response, care leavers relied on the only person they knew would not let them down: themselves.

*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, err, 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)

This was also reflected in the way care leavers talked about the local authority staff responsible for their care, whether or not it was justified.

*I think [the local authority’s] expectation of me is that I should be alright. I should be standing on my 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)

Entering higher education therefore provided some care leavers with an opportunity to end or minimise contact with their local authorities.

The interviews revealed that although care leavers identified areas where they needed support, they were matter of fact that support would not be forthcoming.

Even where care leavers are aware that support exists, a tendency for self-reliance potentially still poses a dilemma. Is it preferable to continue living unassisted but keep their care background hidden from everyone at their university or college, or is it better to disclose their background and receive support intended for care leavers? A member of staff from a local authority described how he saw this situation.

*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 [enter higher education] 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. (Local Authority 4)*

#### *Overcoming care leavers' self-reliance and lack of expectation*

Raising care leavers' expectations about the level of support available, and persuading them that it is in their best interests to disclose their care backgrounds are therefore significant issues for staff in local authorities and higher education institutions. The findings of the current study suggest that one approach to overcoming these issues is for staff in both organisations to develop a more coherent working relationship with one another. Recognising their respective strengths and weaknesses in terms of their relationships with care leavers will enable staff in both organisations to better co-ordinate their efforts to make care leavers aware of available support and encourage them to come forward and engage in the support process. Unless staff in local authorities and higher education institutions are able to engage care leavers in the support process, even the most comprehensive and generous support packages will have limited impact. The remainder of this paper considers this hypothesis in greater depth.

#### *The role of local authority staff*

Local authority staff in the study described beginning to think about higher education as an option for young people long before any decisions had to be made, just as they would with their own children.

*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 [for looked after children] as well.* (Local Authority 5)

Local authority staff made attempts to raise aspirations and make potential students aware of the ongoing support available to them should they enter higher education. One care leaver explained what being made aware of the available support meant to her, describing it as being, "like a comfort blanket, the information to wrap round you" (Zoe, aged 29). Preparing care leavers well in advance for higher education and ensuring they are aware of the package of support available to them should help them overcome a lack of expectation at being supported.

In addition to raising care leavers' expectations by ensuring they are aware of the support available should they enter higher education, local authorities are well placed to ensure that young people understand the implications of disclosing a care background to staff at their university or college. When she applied for university, Kerry did not understand the implications of disclosing her care background on the application form.

*Ticking [the disclosure box]... '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, 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 security, feeling secure.* (Kerry, aged 24)

Without this disclosure, in England universities and colleges cannot identify which students are eligible for support aimed specifically at care leavers. Local authority staff need to reassure young people that staff in higher education institutions are bound by strict rules on confidentiality and that only a very limited number of individuals will know about their background. Making care leavers aware of the process and implications of disclosure will further reinforce a positive expectation of receiving support through higher education.

Although local authority staff may face difficulties providing ongoing support to care leavers who do not wish to continue their relationship as they enter higher education, they still have a potentially important role in supporting care leavers because they understand the young person's history and the circumstances which led to them becoming looked after. They

will also be aware of a care leaver's journey through the care system and the potential long-term implications of those experiences (Davies/Ward 2012; Hildyard/Wolfe 2002; Widom et al. 2008). Local authority staff felt this understanding gave them additional insight into how individual care leavers were likely to react in specific circumstances. For example, where one member of staff from a higher education institution described receiving no contact from care leavers as a sign they were settling in and doing well, a local authority staff member saw this as a possible cause for concern.

*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.* (Local Authority 11)

This is an area where, subject to the rules on student confidentiality, local authority and higher education staff can work together to ensure the well-being of individual care leavers. A staff member from one local authority described how inter-agency working had been successful for a care leaver who had been struggling:

*[The university staff] 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.* (Local Authority 4)

Ultimately, inter-agency working in this way may prevent circumstances deteriorating to the point where care leavers drop out of higher education.

### *The role of staff in higher education institutions*

So far this paper has explored how local authority staff are well positioned in some respects to support care leavers in higher education, to help them overcome the tendency towards self-reliance and the lack of expectation that support will be forthcoming. This section will discuss the ways in which staff in higher education institutions are most able to support care leavers.

Just as local authority staff are well placed to ensure that care leavers enter higher education understanding the support available to them and the benefits of disclosing their care background, higher education staff are in a good position to take the lead in providing that support in situ. The

relationship between higher education staff and care leavers is new and untroubled by any past difficulties. Both parties are also adults, which further differentiates it from the historical relationship between a care leaver and their local authority.

However, the relationship between care leavers and the staff in higher education institutions is not entirely straightforward. Interviews with student support staff in higher education institutions showed that they gave a great deal of consideration to the precise role it was appropriate for them to play in the lives of care leavers who lacked the safety net provided by parents. This issue presented a degree of conflict for some staff in terms of reconciling a hands-on approach to support, while also recognising and promoting care leavers' independence as young adults. Some staff favoured the proactive approach, to an extent stepping into the role normally assumed by parents. "I contact each of my students on a regular basis. Maybe twice weekly. Some of them want it monthly" (Higher education institution 5). Other members of staff were conscious of higher education being a time for promoting independence in young adults.

*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?* (Higher education institution 3)

There was a sense of providing care leavers with the tools to access support, but placing the onus on the individual student to arrange it. "They have the capacity to find someone supportive, but if they don't want it, it's completely up to them" (Higher education institution 16). Overall, student support staff in higher education institutions described taking a more proactive approach to supporting care leavers than they would with other students.

Staff in higher education institutions are also well placed to provide care leavers with face to face support, and named contacts are one example of this. The questionnaire circulated to higher education institutions about their support for care leavers revealed that 56% (28/50) provided a named contact person for care leavers from among their staff. The named contact provided care leavers with a first port of call for advice or support and, where appropriate, they could signpost or co-ordinate further assistance. Care leavers valued having a specific person they could turn to for

advice or assistance in this way. One care leaver explained why she valued having a named contact person to speak to:

*I think about things in a different way to some students 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)*

Named contacts were described as providing reassurance even if circumstances did not arise where their help was required. To an extent, this mirrors the role played by parents who provide a safety net to their children as they learn to make their own decisions and take responsibility for their own lives. Named contacts therefore represent one of the strengths in the relationship between care leavers and staff in higher education institutions.

#### *Differences in regulatory frameworks*

Finally, in addition to highlighting some of the strengths and weaknesses of the roles of local authorities and higher education institutions when supporting care leavers, the study also highlights the difference in the level of regulation governing how higher education institutions and local authorities support care leavers. Interviews with local authority and higher education institution staff highlight how higher education institutions have greater discretion than local authorities to decide who they define as a care leaver and therefore who they provide support to. "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" (Higher education institution 8). Higher education staff valued this flexibility, which allowed them to be responsive to students' needs and direct support where they saw it having greatest benefit. "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" (Higher education institution 15). Examples given by staff of cases where they used their discretion included students who were too old to qualify for care leaver support from their local authority and a student who had lived with grandparents under informal arrangements without the involvement of the local authority.

As discussed earlier, local authorities in England have a statutory duty to promote the education of looked after children, which includes providing ongoing support to care leavers continuing in an agreed programme of education. Eligibility criteria for support are defined in legislation, and are based on the length of time a young person has been "looked after".

Local authorities therefore have little discretion over which young people qualify for support, although local authority staff interviewed described trying to exercise some discretion where it was equitable to do so, for instance, supporting a care leaver financially where they had aged out of the eligibility criteria by a matter of months.

By developing close working relationships with local authorities, staff in higher education institutions can make the most of the discretion available to them when supporting care leavers in order to identify and minimise any deficits in the overall support package being offered to individual care leavers. The effective co-ordination of provision should reduce the likelihood of gaps in support that necessitate self-reliance among care leavers.

## Discussion

Entering higher education is one of a number of stages in a young person's transition to adulthood and independence. For some care leavers in the study, it was a defining moment when they were able to step away from their care backgrounds and start a new phase in their lives. Stein's (2008) description of care leavers who make the most successful transitions to adulthood as the "moving on" group is therefore very fitting for young people beginning the next stage of their lives in higher education. However, despite higher education offering care leavers the promise of a fresh start and the opportunity to be like any other student, care leavers are likely to lack the financial, practical and emotional support traditionally provided by birth parents during this period of transition into adulthood. When this is combined with a tendency towards self-reliance and a lack of expectation that support will be forthcoming, there is a risk of this fresh start being undermined.

### *The potential implications for care leavers of self-reliance and lack of expectation*

The level of self-reliance and lack of expectation found among care leavers in the sample mirrors other studies which have identified high levels of self-sufficiency and independence among care leavers (Cameron 2007; Mallon 2007). It is a tendency that can have both positive and negative implications for care leavers. Possession of these characteristics provides one explanation as to why these particular individuals have succeeded in reaching higher education despite being care leavers, a group more often associated with negative outcomes such as homelessness, unemployment and mental ill health (Daining/DePanfilis 2007; Dixon et al. 2006). In a study of young

people's views, Skuse and Ward (2003) found looked after children to have a, "precocious maturity", but suggest that although this may be a manifestation of resilience in some young people, in others it may be a coping mechanism hiding their true feelings. Similarly, a capacity for self-reliance may help care leavers reach higher education, but there is a risk that these same qualities make them less likely to access the support which, once they begin their chosen programme of study, will enable them to thrive and gain maximum benefit from their experience. An evaluation of the *Staying Put* pilot in England (Munro et al. 2010), a programme intended to give care leavers the opportunity to remain living with carers until the age of 21, found that those individuals already receiving the most support were more likely to engage with the programme than those most in need. Care leavers in higher education exhibiting the highest levels of self-reliance and least expectation of being supported may similarly be the least likely to access support by comparison with care leavers who have been made aware of the support available and are more willing to engage in the support process. A tendency for self-reliance and lack of expectation of being supported may also be compounded by other factors, for instance, pressures on social workers to meet targets, which has been found to result in staff having less time to devote to working directly with young people and developing relationships with them (Holmes et al. 2009; Munro 2001).

In order to overcome the tendency toward self-reliance and lack of expectation, local authority and higher education institution staff therefore need to recognise their respective strengths and weaknesses and work together to engage care leavers in the support process.

#### *The role of local authority staff*

The findings demonstrate how local authority staff in England have a key role in preparing young people for higher education. They are well placed to ensure that care leavers are made aware of the support that will be available to them if they choose to enter higher education, long before the formal application process begins. Local authority staff are also well placed to make sure that care leavers understand the process and implications of disclosing that they were looked after children to their higher education institutions. Care leavers need to understand what additional support disclosure will enable them to access, and what higher education institutions will do with information involved in disclosure.

However, despite local authority staff being in a position to prepare young people for higher education, the findings suggest potential dif-

difficulties in providing this support in practice due to the nature of the relationship between young people and the local authorities responsible for their care. While an ongoing positive relationship with a social worker has been identified as influencing the success with which a young person makes the transition from care into adulthood (Mendes/Moslehuddin 2006; Duncalf 2010), the findings suggests that some care leavers view entering higher education as an opportunity to leave the past behind and make a fresh start. One of the difficulties for local authority staff supporting care leavers is that they represent a link to that past; particularly where the relationship between a care leaver and their local authority has been damaged over time, for instance because of staff turnover, frequency of contact or cancellation of visits (Winter 2009). Maintaining this link may be an unwelcome prospect for care leavers making the transition to adulthood and independence. It is therefore understandable if some care leavers seek to distance themselves from their local authorities when they enter higher education and try to be more self-reliant.

Although care leavers may be unwilling or reluctant to maintain their relationship with local authority staff during this new phase in their lives, particularly where that relationship has been difficult, it is still important that local authority staff continue to be actively involved in the support process once care leavers enter higher education. They will have an understanding of the circumstances leading to a young person entering the care system, their journey through that system, and the ongoing impact of those experiences that higher education staff will not possess. In particular, where staff in higher education institutions might consider not hearing from a care leaver as a sign that all is well, local authority staff may consider it to be a warning sign that something is wrong and the care leaver is not asking for help.

#### *The role of staff in higher education institutions*

When young people without care backgrounds enter higher education, they are not expected to become fully self-reliant overnight. Stein (2006) describes higher education as a period enabling young people to “space out”, which he describes as, “providing a time for freedom, exploration, reflection, risk taking and identity search” (p. 274). During this stage in their transition to adulthood, higher education students in the normative population continue receiving support from their parents (Christie 2005). This was also reflected in the experiences of students in the comparison group in the current study, for instance, a first generation student who

described calling his parents for help when his bank card was declined at a petrol station after filling his car with fuel. The reality of entering higher education is that, regardless of how much young people want to be entirely independent, they generally require a period of ongoing support from the adults in their lives, whether that is their parents, university or college staff, or social workers. As such, they are emerging adults moving through a gradual transition to independence. By minimising or severing the relationship with their local authority when they enter higher education, care leavers are potentially placing themselves at a disadvantage compared to their peers who continue to receive the support of their parents. However, staff in higher education institutions have the benefit of being able to develop a brand new relationship with care leavers, untroubled by any past difficulties. In particular, a staff member acting as a named contact for care leavers provides a potential source of consistent, face to face support and reassurance, something valued by the care leavers interviewed. As such, the findings suggest that staff in higher education institutions are well placed to provide day to day support to care leavers.

Although some staff in higher education institutions were conscious of a potential conflict between promoting independence and providing proactive support, the two need not be mutually exclusive. Furstenberg (2010, p. 80) found that normative transitions into adulthood have become “more protracted and the sequence of transitions less orderly and predictable”, with young people leaving home but returning when circumstances occur such as unemployment or relationship breakdown. Christie (2005) found that third year undergraduates at two Scottish universities continued to receive regular practical and financial assistance from their families, despite having lived away from home for a number of years. Staff in higher education institutions stepping in to provide some of the support traditionally received from parents should not, therefore, be viewed as undermining care leavers in their journey to becoming independent adults. Care leavers have been found to experience compressed and accelerated transitions into adulthood (Stein 2006), so the support provided by staff in higher education institutions may in fact be seen as part of a deceleration process, bringing them closer in line with the gradual move towards adulthood experienced by other students in higher education.

### *Study strengths and limitations*

There has been limited research undertaken in England about the experiences of care leavers in higher education since the study by Jackson and

colleagues (2005) raised awareness of this group of students. The current study therefore provides an indication of how support has subsequently developed and of some of the practical issues encountered by staff from local authorities and higher education institutions responsible for providing support.

The study involves a small sample of care leavers, staff from local authorities and higher education institutions and as such, is not representative of students and support providers across England. As the study participants were self-selecting, staff from local authorities and higher education institutions were also likely to be those who already had some interest in this area. However, the study provides rich data from support providers and a group of students within higher education about which little is currently known.

## Conclusion

There are both strengths and weaknesses in the relationships between local authority and higher education staff and the care leavers that they are responsible for supporting. Where weaknesses exist, it may reinforce a lack of expectation among care leavers that they will be supported, and a belief in the need for self-reliance. However, in many ways, the strengths and weaknesses in the roles of local authority and higher education staff when supporting care leavers are complementary. For instance, although it may be difficult for local authority staff to provide day to day support, staff in higher education are well placed to do so. By recognising this and working together, local authority and higher education staff will more effectively minimise deficits or gaps in support and reduce the self-reliance and lack of expectation of support among care leavers.

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