

The Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark: A Practice Guide



The Frank Buttle Trust



The National Co-ordination Team for Widening Participation

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Action on Access (www.actiononaccess.org)

Action on Access is the national co-ordination team for widening participation in higher education, appointed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England. The Action on Access mission is to promote inclusivity and diversity, and the broadest possible access to higher education. We shape and influence both policy and practice and broker dialogue between policy-makers and practitioners. We challenge and support the sector, working with a wide range of partners and strategic alliances, to help deliver and embed widening participation.

The Frank Buttle Trust (www.buttletrust.org)

The Frank Buttle Trust is a charitable trust which has been providing grant aid to individual children and young people in desperate need across the UK since 1953. It runs 3 grant aid programmes; those of child support, school fees and students and trainees. Children and young people are given immediate financial assistance to alleviate practical experiences of poverty, to give them an opportunity to benefit from their education, and to attain further and higher education thus improving their life outcomes significantly. The lives of many thousands of children, young people and families have been improved through this work. Through its grant-giving the Trust has identified trends and areas of social policy requiring redress and has therefore commissioned research studies. One such study; 'By Degrees: Going to University from Care', has resulted in far-reaching change in policy and practice.

The Students and Trainees Grant Scheme

The Trust's grant scheme for Students and Trainees aims to help young people facing severe social, emotional or health problems to gain academic, trade, professional or vocational qualifications. It provides financial support, particularly with living costs, to enable young people to undertake courses at universities, colleges of further education or other training institutions. Young people between the ages of 16 and 20 are eligible or over 20 when the course and the Trust's financial support began before the applicant was 20.

The Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark

The Frank Buttle Trust has worked with Universities UK, Guild HE, the Association of Colleges and the Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education to develop a statement of commitment to support care leavers in higher education. This statement provides a charter through which higher education providers can demonstrate their commitment to supporting care leavers. Leaving care legislation places a statutory obligation on local authorities and trusts to provide financial, practical and emotional support for young people formerly in care, for as long as they remain in an approved programme of education.

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Foreword



A core strategic priority for the funding council for many years has been to widen participation and improve the success of students that have been traditionally under-represented in higher education. Such students are often from disadvantaged backgrounds and are less likely to receive the kind of support and guidance from their families, communities or schools that their more advantaged peers benefit from. Without this, their horizons can often be more limited – it is not that they necessarily lack ambition or aspiration but rather they are not provided with the appropriate tools to see what might be possible and fully realise their potential.

Institutions have been working for many years, often in partnership with others, to work with such communities of learners to ensure that the option of progression into higher education is there should they choose it. They have also worked to ensure that their provision and support is accessible and flexible enough to meet the needs of a diverse range of students throughout the student life cycle. Taking an inclusive approach to access and student support is to be welcomed and encouraged. However, within those approaches, there still needs to be sufficient flexibility to meet the more specific needs of particular student groups.

We all know that the HE participation rate of care leavers is particularly low and so they are quite rightly a target group for widening participation activities. Properly supporting care leavers from pre-entry right through the transition to study and into employment is absolutely vital and the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark is to be welcomed as a mechanism by which institutions are able to improve their provision and support for this vulnerable group of students.

This guide offers suggestions based on some of the lessons that have already been learned by those institutions already signed up to the Quality Mark and I hope that you are able to translate these to suit the context of your own institution and further improve and develop the support you provide to this very important group.

Sarah Howls, Head of Widening Participation
Higher Education Funding Council for England

Purpose and Audience



The first six higher education institutions (HEIs) who achieved the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark for Care Leavers¹ have recently produced their first three-year monitoring and evaluation reports and have had their Quality Mark renewed. A rapidly growing number of institutions in the United Kingdom now have the Quality Mark and the aim of this publication is to provide a guide of good practice both for those institutions wishing to apply for the Quality Mark as well as those already with the award. The target audience is therefore providers of higher education (HE) in the four countries of the United Kingdom, including further education (FE) colleges delivering higher education.

¹ 'Looked-after children' is the term for young people in care below the age of 16, and from the age of 16 the usual term is care leaver. As universities are working with young people pre- and post-16 both terms will be used in this publication.

Introduction



The transition from childhood to adulthood is a challenging time for any young person. For those who have spent time in care, this period involves a range of additional difficulties not least that of accessing further or higher education.

The Frank Buttle Trust is a grant-giving organisation helping children and young people in particular need. Through one of its grant schemes for students and trainees it helped young people who had been in local authority care to attend HE, and identified that they faced challenges. The Trust therefore commissioned a five-year action research study; 'By Degrees: Going to University from Care', in which 129 care leavers participated². The final report demonstrated that those who succeeded did so against considerable odds. The report made 20 key recommendations, most of which have been acted upon.

The Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark for Care Leavers in Higher Education was created in 2006 in response to the report and to address the particular challenges which young people who have spent time in care face in aspiring to, entering, and progressing successfully through university. The Quality Mark represents a statement of commitment for HE providers which requires them to meet certain criteria demonstrating their dedication to support this vulnerable group of students. In particular the following recommendations from the 2005 report have been addressed by the Quality Mark scheme:

- Every student should have a named personal advisor for the full duration of his/her course.
- All HEIs should have a comprehensive policy for recruitment, retention and support of students from a care background.
- More HEIs should develop further compact arrangements with local authorities to increase participation of care leavers who should be specifically invited to open days and summer schools.
- All institutions should have a named liaison person who can be contacted by leaving-care teams and personal advisors.
- Student welfare/support services should contact new students known to have been in care and be proactive in offering any necessary help with financial, study or personal needs.
- Admissions tutors and widening participation officers should be better informed about the care system and understand that examination grades may reflect difficulties overcome as much as the applicant's level of ability.

² Final report; 'By Degrees: Going to University from Care', Sonia Jackson, Sarah Ajayi and Margaret Quigley, 2005, Thomas Coram Research Unit of the Institute of Education, University of London.

Widening Participation in Higher Education

The government policy to widen participation in HE has a number of key elements in England. All HE providers, including FE colleges delivering significant amounts of HE, have recently been required to submit to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) a Widening Participation Strategic Assessment (WPSA) on which they will report on an annual basis³. 80 HEIs make reference to care leavers in the WPSAs submitted in June 2009, with many providing details of plans and activities to encourage and support care leavers into HE. This will provide a further opportunity for institutions to see their work with looked-after children and care leavers within the context of their whole-institution strategy for widening participation. Identified good practice places institutional strategies to address the needs of care leavers within the broader widening participation and student success strategies.

Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland also have policies and strategies for widening participation in HE. For example in Wales the widening access programme is delivered through the 'Reaching Wider' initiative⁴. In Scotland the Scottish Funding Council supports widening access through Wider Access Regional Forums. In Northern Ireland widening participation is a key priority for the Department of Employment and Learning.

In England, a significant strand of the national widening participation approach is the Aimhigher programme. Currently funded until July 2011, Aimhigher is a national programme which aims to widen participation in HE by raising the aspirations and raising the abilities of people from under-represented communities. Overwhelmingly, these are people from the lower socio-economic groups and disadvantaged backgrounds. Aimhigher partnerships build cross-sector relationships that break down the barriers which institutions and systems can unwittingly create for learners. Partnerships are expected to target their work on four priority groups:

- People from lower socio-economic groups.
- People from disadvantaged socio-economic groups who live in areas of relative deprivation where HE participation is low.
- Looked-after children.
- People with a disability or a specific learning difficulty.

For many years, Aimhigher partnerships have been working to support looked-after children and care leavers into HE. For example, in 2005-06 a national Aimhigher project led by Leicester City and County Councils working with local HE providers, specifically focussed on improving progression for looked-after children⁵. Elsewhere successful work to target looked-after children has and continues to be delivered by a number of Aimhigher partnerships⁶.

By Degrees: Going to University from Care (2005) observed that government initiatives to widen participation 'do not appear to have raised awareness of the needs of care leavers to any appreciable extent' and that, of those widening participation officers who responded to the survey of the research team, very few had any special provision in place for applicants or students with a care background. Since that time there has been a step change in the understanding of the needs of care leavers in all phases of education including HE. We believe that the introduction of the Frank Buttle Trust Quality mark has helped HE institutions drive that change forward in the context of their own provision and support⁷.

³ HEFCE circular, January, 2009/1.

⁴ The Higher Education Funding Council for Wales has recently published *Widening Access: Looked-After Children and Care Leavers*, 3 July 2009, W09/21HE.

⁵ The Way Ahead Project 2005-6

⁶ See: *Making a Difference: the impact of Aimhigher; working with a specific widening participation target group*, p.12, Action on Access (2005).

⁷ At the time of writing 66 higher education institutions have obtained the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark and a further 48 have been having discussions with the Trust about the award. 6

The Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark

The Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark is underpinned by the Higher Education Commitment to Care Leavers which recognises good practice in the HE sector in supporting care leavers⁸. To receive the Quality Mark, the commitment must be explicitly reflected in the policy framework of the HE provider and receive endorsement by the Vice-Chancellor, Principal or head of the institution. The commitment establishes a statement of intent on behalf of the HE provider to support care leavers to enter and progress successfully through HE.

The Commitment to Care Leavers which the Quality Mark recognises seeks to:

- Facilitate an increase in the number of care leavers entering HE⁹.
- Raise awareness of the needs of this group of students.
- Enable care leavers to make the most of their time in HE and complete their courses successfully.
- Help HE providers to identify how best to support care leavers.
- Contribute to a national framework which will assist local authorities and trusts to fulfil their obligations.

Monitoring

The four broad Quality Mark categories which HE providers applying for the Quality Mark must work within regarding care leaver students are:

- to raise aspirations and achievements,
- to have appropriate admissions procedures,
- to provide entry and ongoing support, and
- to monitor the implementation of the Commitment.

Three months before the Quality Mark is due for renewal institutions submit a Monitoring and Evaluation report which reviews performance over the three year period from the initial application and granting of the Quality Mark. If this report is satisfactory the Quality Mark will be re-issued. Institutions will have previously submitted an Outline Project Plan at the application stage and an Implementation Report after one year. The three-year report looks at performance against the commitments set out in these earlier documents.

Institutions vary considerably and the Frank Buttle Trust recognises that approaches to working with and supporting care leavers in HE will also vary. A range of criteria do need to be met, but the Trust also looks for a coherent and creative approach, with sustainable policies and practices embedded in strategy.

What follows are examples of the innovative and creative ways in which some institutions have approached this work. The case studies offered have been drawn from reports by institutions to the Frank Buttle Trust, from visits to four institutions and meetings with the lead person responsible for this work at the institutions, and from telephone conversations and email communications with colleagues in institutions, local authorities and with care leavers.

⁸ Details about the Quality Mark and how to apply can be found at: http://www.buttletrust.org/quality_mark/. Sharing practice about the Quality Mark is encouraged. The contact details for institutions with the Quality Mark can be found at: http://www.buttletrust.org/fncms_orphan/quality_mark_award_contacts/?orphan_parent_id=87

⁹ The number of known care leavers aged 19 in full time HE in England has increased from 260 in 2004 (5% of care leavers) to 400 in 2008 (6%) and 420 in 2009 (7%). See <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s000878/index.shtml> Table G1, for full details of care leavers in education and training. In Northern Ireland in 2006, 47 (4.5%) care leavers were in HE.

Case Studies



An Institution-Wide Approach

Policy and Strategy

Those institutions which have achieved the Quality Mark and have recently successfully applied for renewal following the submission of a monitoring and evaluation report demonstrate a number of significant features. At whole-institution level the two most important factors are:

- Demonstrable support at Vice-Chancellor, Principal or Pro Vice-Chancellor level.
- A strategy for work with looked-after children and care leavers which is embedded and sustained within the institution's widening participation strategy which in turn is a key component of the corporate plan.

For example, one university strategic plan states:

“Widening participation is thus already embedded in the culture of the institution and it is clearly referenced in the main strategies and policies that address specific phases of the student life cycle. The institution has adopted a framework which encompasses all relevant strategies and policies. The framework references the key stages of the student life cycle and the explicit target groups for the institution, including care leavers as an explicit target group with effect from 2006.”

In another university the plan of commitment for care leavers is a reflection of the university's strategic plan part of which states:

“The university is not only strongly opposed to all forms of discrimination but is actively committed to encouraging the widest possible participation in higher education and to offering all students a high-quality experience.”

In both these institutions operational plans relating to the work with looked-after children and care leavers show that such work is not a bolt-on but an active part of a whole-institution approach to widening participation within which the needs of this particular group of students can be met. As one staff member in another institution observed:

“We have to keep the costs manageable. We don't want to create an industry. However because we have the systems in place throughout the student life cycle for all students we are in a position, with modest extra resource, to meet the needs of care leavers.”

In another Quality Mark institution the Deputy Vice-Chancellor in interview made clear his commitment to championing the profile of looked-after-children and care leavers and explained that:

“The university is in the final stages of agreeing a new corporate strategy [one aim of which is] to ensure that we reach out to under-represented groups, through our widening participation policy, to ensure equality of opportunity. This aim directly links the care leaver work to other similar mainstreamed work that is developing in the institution.”

A further indicator of how far the support for looked-after children and care leavers is embedded in the institution might be whether the university’s Access Agreement required by the Office for Fair Access has been updated to refer to this group of learners¹⁰. So for example in one English university:

“Since the care leaver scheme started the university’s agreement with the Office for Fair Access was updated and from September 2008 students at the university who are care leavers now receive a £1000 non-means-tested bursary each progressive year of their study.”

And in Northern Ireland a university applying for the Quality Mark in 2009 has already taken action to:

“Revise our Access Agreement to endorse the role of the Frank Buttle Trust and our commitment to care leavers.”

A Plan and Clearly Offered Support

Another feature of effective systems to support looked-after children is a clearly set out plan. The Student Life Cycle model or Student Journey offers a framework for a logical approach to planning support for these learners as for all learners.

Quality Mark institutions are required to publicise the institution’s system of support for care leavers. Such support includes access to and additional support from the designated contact worker for care leavers through the application process, as well as through their programmes of study, and priority allocation for a place in the university halls of residence or other suitable accommodation for 365 days a year for the duration of the degree course as well as an annual bursary for the same period.

For example, one university identifies the key areas in a structured system of support as:

- Dedicated point of contact from enquiry through to graduation.
- Non-means-tested bursary.
- Referral directly to head of student funding.
- Potential for reduced offer under the Compact scheme.
- Accommodation services – referral directly to the head of accommodation.
- Pre-enrolment welcome session.
- Access to the Mobility Fund (to assist with costs of overseas placement).
- Designated faculty support officers.
- Annual forum on care leaver support.

¹⁰ Since December 2006 the Office for Fair Access has offered specific guidance on support for care leavers including advice on applying for the Quality Mark. See: <http://www.offa.org.uk/guidance-notes/looked-after-children-laccare-leavers/>

Raising Awareness within the Institution

In the institutions included in this study the management of the support for care leavers is usually situated within a central department such as student services or the widening participation office. These departments have adopted a range of approaches to raising awareness of the needs of care leavers with staff across the institution of which the following are just a few examples:

- A Care Leavers Forum which is attended by local authority staff as well as key institutional staff from faculties and central departments.
- An internal staff group representing key areas from across the university including access and widening participation, admissions, mature student adviser, accommodation, career development service, bursaries and financial support. A care leaver student is a key member of this group.
- Delivering presentations to partner further education colleges at their annual conference, and awareness sessions have been held with central admissions staff.
- Ensuring that care leavers are a standing item on the student services team meetings as well as the widening participation sub-group meetings.

It is clear from interviews with care leaver co-ordinators in the institutions visited that the time they dedicated to building links with internal departments, such as accommodation and student finance, is crucial to the success of care leavers.

Staffing and Organisation

In the institutions visited roles and responsibilities in respect of care leavers are clearly defined.

One model is:

Level	Post	Role
Strategic Level	Vice-Chancellor, Principal, Pro Vice-Chancellor or equivalent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commits to and signs Quality Mark application • Provides strategic leadership and coherence with whole-institution strategy • Meets Frank Buttle Trustee at some stage within their Quality Mark Award period
Senior/Middle Management	Head of widening participation, director of student services or similar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develops and monitors plan for work with care leavers • Line manager of care leaver co-ordinator or similar
Operational	Care leaver co-ordinator or similar, often one part of larger role, for example: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access and widening participation co-ordinator • Project manager • Education liaison manager • PA to the director of student services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First point of contact for care leavers especially at pre-application, application, enrolment and induction stages. • Liaises with course teams to ensure on-programme support



Whilst those institutions with good care leaver support have very effective staffing structures, including a dedicated first point of contact, this role is usually part of a wider role which may be around widening participation, school and college liaison or student services and support. As one institution observed: “We have to work smartly... we are not creating an industry.”

Care leavers are one element of a coherent approach to widening participation. Institutions with effective and coherent structures for student support generally are already well-placed to support care leavers. As can be seen above, at operational level job titles are less important than the presence of a dedicated person who is the first point of contact for care leavers and who is able to signpost to all other services but can also intervene when needed.

Working with Local Authorities¹¹

Local authorities are key to success in supporting care leavers and looked-after children into and through HE, yet, as with many partnerships, the development of productive relationships between HEIs and local authorities can be challenging. As one institution in the North West reported to the Frank Buttle Trust in its three-year monitoring and evaluation report:

“We have maintained our process of systematic communication with all of the leaving care teams within the North West After Care Forum, supporting people teams and partner colleges. This work is time-consuming and frustrating, because of changes in local authority arrangements and staffing [but] there are now signs that more after care workers are pro-actively taking the initiative to contact the university. This is encouraging, but also illustrates just how challenging this work is. In short, there are no quick wins for this type of work.”

Another institution talked about having to build-up trust and understanding with local authority staff and that this takes time:

“Our major success has been with our relationships with local authorities and the excellent raising aspiration events that have transpired. These relationships built up over time and based on mutual understanding and trust have not only enabled successful activities to take place now, but have ensured that our work can continue long term.”

A number of common themes arose in relation to working with local authorities:

- Local authorities are all different and have different arrangements for looked-after children and care leavers despite a national policy framework.
- There is a need for HEIs to understand the different roles and functions within local authorities' looked-after children education services, virtual head teachers, leaving care teams, and the need to establish effective ways of working with them¹².
- Local authorities are crucial in helping to identify looked-after children and care leavers.

Examples of successful strategies that institutions have adopted for engaging with local authorities include:

- Supporting and working with Aimhigher to establish a sub-regional After Care Forum which provides a network of contacts within local authorities.
- An annual forum comprising key internal staff, plus local authority staff, with an agenda which includes detailing the university's support for care leavers.
- A planned and systematic programme of contacts with local authority teams at key stages in the year.
- Clear referral systems to the HEI for each local authority within the immediate locality, supported by a care leaver's information pack which is regularly updated.
- Briefing sessions for local authorities and foster carers¹³.
- Offers to all local authorities in the area to provide inputs at training sessions.
- Two city universities working together and meeting with their neighbouring local authorities three times a year.
- Inviting local authority partners to brief the internal co-ordinating group.
- Local authority delivers training to student support officers who are the first point of contact for care leavers in the university.

¹¹ The website of the National Care Advisory Service contains details of the legal requirements of local authorities in the United Kingdom with respect to looked after children and care leavers. It also has the contact details of the chairs of regional Care Leaving Forums in the UK through whom individual local authorities can be contacted and provides a search facility for the contact details of local authority lead officers for care leavers in England. See: <http://www.leavingcare.org/>

¹² Some local authorities are combining looked-after children education teams and care leaver teams to provide an education support service for all young people from 4 to 25.

¹³ Foster carers in many parts of England have organised local Foster Care Associations (FCAs). These are voluntary groups, many of which offer a range of resources to their members. For further information contact the FCA development worker at the Fostering Network on 020 7620 8404 or email fca@fostering.net. The Fostering Network also provides learning and development opportunities for foster carers in each of the four home countries: <http://www.fostering.net/>



Case Study: Universities, Local Authority and Aimhigher Co-operation

The visits to institutions identified a range of approaches to working with local authorities. In one example outlined below, the Aimhigher partnership in the county facilitated the partnership with local HE institutions.

Since June 2007 Aimhigher Derbyshire has funded a part-time post to work with the County Council to promote HE to children in care. There are two main strands - mentoring and events/visits. The post holder is a member of the local authority's Looked-after Children Education Support (LACES) team which oversees the education of around 600 looked-after children. This project reflects the recently revised objective of the county's LACES team to focus on raising the attainment of children in care.

Mentoring

The local university, through Aimhigher, identify the student mentors who are trained by the university and by the LACES Aimhigher project teacher. The mentees are identified by the LACES team and social workers and are usually in Year 10 or 11. The young people are usually the higher achieving youngsters but there is some flexibility.

The mentoring takes place in an 8 week block with the mentors acting very much like a good parent - helping and supporting with homework, encouraging the young people to think about going on to HE and telling them about what life is like at university.

Events

Two visits to another local university were arranged for year 10s and 11s in care. On both occasions the young people were given problem-solving activities, tours of the campus, talks about the range of courses and talks from current students, some of whom were themselves care leavers.

Support through the Student Life Cycle

The Student Life Cycle Model

The Student Life Cycle model has been adopted by institutions to ensure that strategies to widen participation and those for teaching and learning take into account all the phases of the student experience. It provides a holistic perspective of the student experience linking participation, learning and teaching and employability¹⁴.

Aligned with the practice outlined above, there are a number of effective strategies for engaging with looked-after children and care leavers from the pre-enrolment phases of raising aspiration and achievement through to pre-entry guidance, application, admissions, entry, on-programme support, and successful achievement.

The following brief examples are not exhaustive of current practice but are examples of what has worked for particular institutions.

Raising Aspirations and Achievement

“It is more difficult to study [in a local authority care home]. There are drugs and distractions. But I want to concentrate on myself. Helping young people in care is a great idea because they have to put in extra effort.”
(Care leaver)

All HEIs engage in some outreach activities either individually and/or in partnership with schools and colleges, for example, through Aimhigher partnerships in England, the Reaching Wider partnerships in Wales, the Wider Access Regional Forums in Scotland or the Department of Employment and Learning widening participation initiatives in Northern Ireland. The challenge has been to identify looked-after children within the programmes of activities and to decide whether they should have additional dedicated activities.

One university observed:

“A review of the history and development of our outreach and aspiration-raising, our successes and some of our disappointments, highlights some of the challenges associated with the targeted support for looked-after children. There can often be a long lead in time before any programme evolves to meet needs and gets off the ground. There is a need for staff to be creative as well as tenacious.”

This particular institution subsequently drew back from offering specific events aimed at looked-after children alone because of low take-up, but instead included them and identified them within mainstream outreach programmes. However more recently as a result of developing stronger links with a local authority the university has begun the development of an innovative programme specifically for this group of learners.

¹⁴ HEFCE , Strategic Plan 2003-08, circular 03/12.

Case Study: The STAS Programme (Students Taking Action for Success)

STAS is an integrated five-year programme for young people from school Years 9-13, their carers and social workers. Originally funded through Aimhigher but now entirely funded by the university, the programme recognises the often disjointed education path these young people follow and has been designed to facilitate dip in/dip out provision over the five years. It also offers support to assist transition into and through the university. The programme includes study skills, confidence building, HE awareness and student life as well as subject taster sessions. The programme started in 2007/08 with three events each attended by six participants. It was re-launched in January 2009 with 12 attendees and currently has a cohort of 13 young people attending on a regular basis consisting largely of pupils from three neighbouring local authorities.

All the universities in this study made active attempts to identify and include looked-after children in their outreach activities but also identified opportunities to develop events specifically for this group. The key to success in the STAS programme was gaining the support of the local authority to identify young people. As the organiser of the programme observed:

“The challenges we face recruiting for the STAS project are only the same as for any project which involves multi-agency representation - trying to get through to the right person. The fact that we try to ensure consistency in our practice really seems to help; so it is always me who writes and co-ordinates every event so the pupils feel comfortable and are happy to get in touch. We try where possible to use the same student advocates for each event and to involve the pupils in planning events to ensure that what we are planning is relevant and useful.”

Case Study: Summer Schools for Looked-After Children

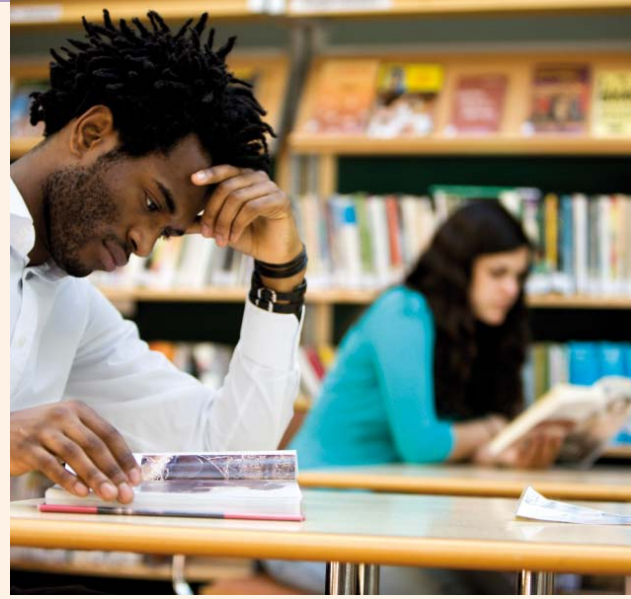
Summer schools have evolved as an important element of the Aimhigher and other programmes. They can be residential or non-residential and are mainly aimed at year 11 and 12 pupils in widening participation target groups. Summer schools provide a valuable experience of HE.

“It was a good experience...it’s made me want to come to university. It made me feel I can actually do it if I tried.” (Care leaver)

“The best bits were on the barge, being able to sit with the boys and talk to them on their level. The summer school gave me a better understanding of foster kids and kids in care, about their backgrounds and home life. It was a great two days and I would love to do it all over again.” (Student Ambassador)

One institution planned a series of mini summer schools aimed at looked-after children:

“Looked-after children in year 9 were encouraged to apply for a place on the summer school programme by the Aimhigher co-ordinators based in their schools. Unfortunately there was no response using this method. Therefore local authority staff promoted the summer school via social services, social workers, along with named persons at the schools. These methods proved very successful and the summer school became full very quickly. During 2008/9 three mini summer schools ran with total of 30 young people who were in care. The two day events took the form of a day at the university followed by a night and day on a canal boat. This enabled time for getting to know the young people and sometimes their carers. The university now has direct contact with these young people and their carers and will continue to have contact with them over the next few years; the next time being on a university day in the October half-term 2009 planned to coincide with National Care Leavers Week.”



A similar co-operative approach with local authorities also supported another university with its neighbouring local authority to offer a two-day summer school for looked-after children which:

“Gave attendees the opportunity to work across two different universities and meet students from both. The event concluded with a mock graduation ceremony attended by Pro Vice-Chancellors from both institutions. Foster carers were also invited to this event and attended sessions specifically designed for them.”

The importance of building good relationships with local authorities is again demonstrated by the experience of a third university:

“Our work with four local authorities resulted in two successful aspiration raising events in 2008. Through these the university had contact with 36 young people and six carers for whom we developed a specific programme. During 2009 we have to date delivered two events and had contact with 28 young people and five carers. Another two events are taking place during the summer where we expect to see another 20 young people.”

Alongside these specific events targeted at looked-after children, institutions also aimed to identify and support such children in their mainstream aspiration-raising events. For example, one London university annually works with over 350 local schools on aspiration- and awareness-raising activities with pupils from years 5 to 12. There have not been separate activities provided for looked-after children; rather they have been included when identified by schools. However this university, having established excellent links with two or three neighbouring local authorities, is now trialling a year 10 university day for looked-after children.

The above examples demonstrate that without the active co-operation of local authorities it is very difficult to run events targeted solely at looked-after children. Similarly if looked-after children are to be encouraged into and supported through mainstream outreach events the local authority, schools, and Aimhigher are key partners. Barnardos and Action for Children are also important partners in some parts of the country.

A LACES teacher who had developed aspiration raising events for care leavers observed that events of this type were valued by the young people themselves. They welcomed the specific events – they said this provided a unique opportunity to meet with other care leavers to share experience and also provided mutual support. Her pupils were often reluctant to attend general events and she had therefore worked successfully with a local HEI to develop events for looked-after children alone.



Case Study: Student Ambassador Scheme

“I am doing a BTEC in Art and Design at College. I then want to come to this university because it is near my home. Being in care is no harder than being anywhere else if you have the right people around you.”

(Care leaver)

Funded by the local authority social services department the university paired 10 fully trained and CRB-checked university undergraduate students with 13-17 year old looked-after children. The mentoring offered mentees the chance to take part in social activities such as bowling, going to the cinema or eating out, all designed to raise levels of confidence and self-esteem. The undergraduate mentors offer support via a befriending and guiding role that is designed to raise the mentees awareness of HE opportunities and what they can expect to receive in terms of support. Originally planned for 8 weeks the programme was extended to 12 weeks and repeated in 2009/10.

The university involved described the impact of this programme on one young man as potentially life changing:

“R looked upon his mentor as a big brother and his carer commented on the dramatic change in motivation and attitude which followed R’s involvement in the scheme.”

Support through Application and Entry

The UCAS Form

Care leavers and students who have been in care at any time are invited to identify this on the UCAS form. Whilst there have been concerns in the past about the accuracy of the UCAS tick box, the criteria has been amended for 2009 entrants¹⁵ and is being reviewed for 2010 and therefore should result in more accurate figures for the numbers of care leavers in a particular institution. Care leaver co-ordinators based in HEIs see the tick box as the best way of identifying care leavers and one described it as a brilliant but simple idea.

Institutions are flexible in their definition of care leavers. For example, in one university although technically the student has to be in local authority care at the time of enrolment, they also look to support those over 25 with a

¹⁵ Applicants can tick a box which indicates that they have been in care even for a short time. For 2009 entrants the wording stated: *‘If you have spent any time in local authority care, even for one day, (this includes if you have been in public care and had lived in one or more of foster care, semi-independent living or residential care homes), please select ‘yes’ from the drop-down list.*

17 *Universities and colleges will treat this information in confidence and may use this information to contact you to discuss whether or not you may need any extra resources or support to undertake your chosen course. If you have not spent time in care, please select ‘no’.*

care background and also look at the individual needs of Foyer¹⁶ students. In another university the care leaver co-ordinator also describes a flexible approach to defining care leavers:

“There are strict criteria although there is some flexibility. For example, we had a young person who lost her parents when she was 17 and went into care at that point – we felt she should have the bursary. The same goes for young people who are classed as ‘homeless’ as opposed to ‘care leavers’ and have been in supported lodgings. We use a ‘referee’ system to confirm the status of the young person which also means we have a contact person for the care leaver from the beginning of term which can be very useful.”

It is also beneficial when the core responsibility for care leavers sits in the central department which also includes central admissions and student services:

“Using the UCAS tick box we are able to see what offers our care leavers have received. In cases where care leavers have been rejected we are able, through our admissions team, to re-examine the application and discuss with admissions tutors to understand the reasons behind the decision. We are continuing to work with our admissions administrators, tutors and heads of recruitment to ensure they understand our university-wide commitment to care leavers. The tick box also means that we are able to write to all applicants who have declared themselves to be care leavers in the summer prior to enrolment to outline our support and to welcome them once they arrive at the university.”

Similarly, in another university the head of admissions described how applicants who tick the care leavers’ box on the UCAS form are written to with details of university support for care leavers and also are referred immediately to the first point of contact for care leavers.

Whilst important, the UCAS tick box does rely on self-identification. Institutions use a number of other ways for identifying care leavers including:

- Referrals by local authorities, schools and colleges.
- Through aspiration-raising events, including Aimhigher activities.
- Through compact schemes.
- Through internal departments and faculties, especially student funding and accommodation.

Compact Schemes

A number of institutions are using their compact scheme to support care leavers through the application process and into the university. A compact scheme is where an HEI has an agreement with partner schools or colleges that applicants to the institution will receive an enhanced entitlement which may include reduced admissions requirement in terms of UCAS tariff points, additional support throughout the application process, and a bursary once admitted. Where care leavers have been included in the compact they receive the benefits of the compact and are regarded as a national group within the compact.

¹⁶ The Foyer Federation develops and encourages new approaches to supporting young people at risk as they make their transition to adult independence.



Case Study: Compact Scheme

The scheme has been established to help improve participation rates in HE and to provide local opportunities for progression to HE. It also includes care leavers in the UK. A key feature of the scheme is enhanced information, advice and guidance for applicants regarding courses, accommodation, funding and finance. As well as a bursary the scheme also offers flexible entry requirements and students may be considered for a reduced offer of up to 30 UCAS points.

Care leavers will be advised by the compact co-ordinator of the range of support available to them and, with the care leavers' permission, the co-ordinator will inform a named and designated member of staff in accommodation, student funding, the faculty student support officer and other departments such as health and counselling, disability, and language support if appropriate. Care leavers can request appointments with these teams; it is entirely optional.

Another institution with a compact with over 100 schools and colleges has also designated care leavers as a national compact group and aims to ensure that all care leavers applying know they can apply through the compact. This then automatically entitles them to a range of additional services and support should they require it.

Informing Applicants

"I'm not personally someone who likes claiming to be a care leaver because it's personal, but the publicity needs to be informative without being in your face." (Care leaver)

Institutions are developing a range of approaches to informing potential care leaver applicants about what is on offer including:

- A pilot applicant portal with dedicated pages for care leavers.
- Publicity leaflets for care leavers explaining the Compact scheme entitlements and information on applying, bursaries, accommodation and general support.
- Leaflets with a named first point of contact.
- Letters to applicants who have identified themselves as care leavers outlining support and naming the contact person.

Case Study: Informing Applicants

One university is involving care leavers in the design and content of the publicity material:

“Following the September 2008 review of this work [we] agreed to explore and develop some new publicity material that will target both pre- and post-16 students. Advice as to the appropriateness, layout, and material content of this new information material is currently being sought from two focus groups of young people who are from care backgrounds who are currently being supported by our partners from the Barnardos Seen and Heard project.”

Some institutions have a care leavers’ page of their web site. One Scottish institution has developed a care leavers’ section on their university web site with an input from care leavers and care professionals, and with links to information about finance, accommodation and student support.

Arrival and Enrolment

“They treat you more like a friend and are less formal, for example the way that the support is delivered, explaining it and receiving the advice. Some people can be condescending but I never got this feeling here.”
(Care leaver)

Although the ideal would be to identify and deal with the support needs of care leavers before they arrive at an university or college the reality is that some may arrive at an institution still needing much advice and guidance. This is likely to be in vital areas such as grants, bursaries and accommodation due perhaps to late self-identification as a care leaver as well as the variable level of information and support offered by local authorities. Care leavers are entitled to support from their local authority up to the age of 25 when in an approved programme of education but the actual support package they receive varies between local authorities. There is also a fine line to be drawn when offering support, between recognising their genuine support needs and being over-protective or over-supportive. As one care leaver co-ordinator observed:

“University is about independence – care leavers should not be patronised. They often have more life experience than other students but nevertheless do need a skills base to deal with a corporate system and may feel powerless and disenfranchised which is the rationale for [this university’s] input.”

Institutions will often identify a named first point of contact for care leavers throughout the application and enrolment period. Often this person is in a central department but there are different approaches, for example:

“Any care leaver who identifies themselves or has agreed that their name can be disclosed by their local authority leaving care team, will have their name forwarded to the relevant student support officer (SSO) for their course. The SSOs who are based in each of the 8 faculties, and affiliated to the centrally-based student services, have been identified as the university’s key named contacts with respect to the support and entitlements of care leavers. As well as fulfilling an important diagnostic/advocacy role in the referral to other services such as finance, counselling, disability support, careers, accommodation, the SSOs also provide valuable support in the development of study skills.”

Bursaries¹⁸

“Without the finance I couldn’t have afforded to go to uni and without the support of the link person I wouldn’t have been able to cope.” (Care leaver)

Since the Office for Fair Access guidance was amended in December 2006 to encourage English HE providers to offer specific support for care leavers, Access Agreements are increasingly identifying additional bursary support for this group of students. In one university, for example, the annual bursary is £1500, whilst in another care leavers now receive a non-means-tested bursary of £1000 a year, recently increased from £300, and in addition can also apply for the standard university bursary. In the same university:

“A good relationship exists between education liaison staff (including the compact co-ordinator) and the head of student funding (and their wider team) ensuring information sharing to identify students and administer their bursaries. The funding team has been able to negotiate for two students to receive their bursaries early when their financial situation required.”

Other approaches to providing advice on financial support include:

- The care leaver co-ordinator contacts all new care leaver students 3-4 weeks after the start of term to check whether there is any further need for financial support.
- Care leavers have an automatic referral to the Student Union for a full finance and welfare health check.

Recognising the importance of reviewing the take-up of financial and other support, one university found that of 35 care leavers attending over a three-year period 32 received the care leavers bursary, 17 accessed the financial support team for additional support from Access to Learning Funds and 12 requested short-term loans.

Accommodation

The potential need for year round university accommodation is recognised in those institutions with the Quality Mark, although individual student needs vary widely. One university found, for example, that in practice there was little demand for all-year accommodation. Three approaches are outlined below:

“All care leavers are invited to discuss their accommodation requirements and priority is given for hall places. Sometimes this has been challenging where students have not declared themselves as care leavers at the halls allocation point [late August] and may not be eligible for halls under normal accommodation policy. Once identified this can be resolved. Another issue for the accommodation team has been the varying response of local authorities in dealing with students over vacation periods (such as recalling them to local authority areas when they have a hall place from September to the end of June). Current students and their social workers have also been meeting with accommodation staff to discuss their circumstances for post-halls accommodation in the second year.”

And in another university:

“Special consideration is given to care leavers in their search for accommodation. We have a single point of contact in the accommodation office who can deal with individual cases as they arrive. We recently had a young man who was desperate to stay in the same room of his university-managed accommodation as he had been moved around so much prior to his enrolment. Through meetings with the accommodation office we were able secure this room for him for the next two years.”

¹⁸ From August 2009 care leavers in England going into HE are entitled to a bursary of a minimum of £2000 from their local authority in addition to any existing support. In Wales consultation on this is still in progress and Scotland does not have this in place. Similarly in Northern Ireland there is as yet no government HE bursary scheme for care leavers.

And:

“Support includes access to and additional support from the designated contact worker for the care leavers through the application process as well as through their programme of study, and priority allocation for a place in university halls of residence for 365 days a year for the period of the degree course as well as an annual bursary of £750.”

Whilst the individual circumstances of care leavers varies a common theme in the Quality Mark institutions is the vital importance of the single point of contact who can facilitate arrangements with central departments for accommodation, bursaries and other practical needs. These are young people who have experienced uncertainty in their lives so to secure all-year accommodation for the duration of their course provides a vital level of security and stability.

On-Programme Support

“Yes I contacted the link person and her before and after support is the reason I’m still at Uni.”

“I would just like to say that the link person does an amazing job, she has made me feel like I matter and has helped me so much. The occasional email that reads so kindly makes me happy and realise I’m not alone, that I have support.” (Care leaver)

Whilst support through the application, admissions, and induction phase is important there is also a need for access to continuing support through a learner’s programme of study. Institutions adopt different approaches to the delivery of continuing support through this stage of the student life cycle as is demonstrated by the following examples.

All institutions with the Quality Mark have a designated lead person for work with care leavers. As we have seen, this person is usually located in a central department and their contact details are shown on publicity material. Their role is especially important at the application, enrolment and induction phase. In many cases this key person has support for care leavers as only part of their job and has other responsibilities. In fact the care leaver role may form a relatively small part of the total job role.

The link person’s role in supporting the student from enrolment and into his or her programme of study is crucial. However how this is done varies between institutions. For example:

“Once on course, initially the link person for care leavers will contact each student, either in person or over the telephone, to discuss and negotiate the particular arrangements to meet their individual needs. Arrangements will usually be made for the link person to have regular contact with the student, normally on a two weekly, monthly, or termly cycle. Each student is different and their requirements need to be taken on a case-by-case basis, highlighting once more the importance of flexibility when working with such individuals.”

Similarly in another university, once the learners are on their programme they are given the name of the on-course care leaver co-ordinator who is based in the learner support team, but there is no specific or different support offered to care leavers beyond that available to all students unless it is asked for. The principle is that the university’s support system for all students is good and care leavers will access this in the same way as other learners. Furthermore the whole university has signed up to the Quality Mark, not simply student services, and it is important that ownership for the support of these learners is embedded in the faculties. The embedding of support for care leavers within an institution’s support system for all students reflects a successful implementation of the Quality Mark principles which can be achieved at a mature stage of the process.



Tracking, Monitoring and Evaluation

With regard to the question of how far institutions know how care leavers are performing once on their programme, and track their care leavers through to completion, it appears that most institutions with the Quality Mark have paid most attention to the aspiration-raising, application, enrolment and induction phases of the student experience. All identify financial support as a key issue, not just at entry but throughout the course, and all have mechanisms for offering support in these circumstances.

One university has put in place a range of mechanisms to assist them in their monitoring and evaluation of their commitment to care leavers throughout their course of study. This includes:

- Feedback from care leaver students.
- Individual student tracking and analysis of data.
- Regular reviews of progress against the care leaver's action plan reported annually to the widening participation group and equal opportunities student support committee.
- Regular informal and formal reviews of activities and events as part of the regular review process for all widening participation activities.

The tracking has shown that 35 known care leavers studied in the university over the last three years - a growth from 3 in 05/06 to 24 in 08/09. Of the 35, two have graduated, 6 have withdrawn and the remainder are still studying. Of the six who have dropped out, five left because of personal reasons beyond the university's control.

In another university the team overseeing monitoring and evaluation, led by the widening participation team, has a student representative on the group to ensure feedback from care leavers including advice on programme design.

Quality Mark institutions are required to submit a simple statistical return annually to the Frank Buttle Trust including the number of care leavers applying and being offered places. However some institutions have further developed their monitoring and evaluation of the care leaver experience including the tracking of such learners through the university and the use of learner questionnaires. This approach is clearly beneficial in continuing to monitor and develop support and to inform future planning and improvement. Whilst some institutions have effective monitoring

and evaluation systems in place, this area is probably the least well-developed in Quality Mark institutions which is understandable given the relative early phase of the Quality Mark process. However, more institutions are looking to introduce monitoring and evaluation arrangements now that they have established the basic framework of support.

A Summary of Effective Practice

Institution level

- Care leaver strategy linked to institutional strategy, integral with widening participation strategy and referenced in the widening participation strategic assessment.
- Clear commitment to care leavers in OFFA Access Agreement.
- Clarity of roles and responsibilities with commitment at Vice-Chancellor/Pro Vice-Chancellor/Principal level.
- A plan for care leaver support which is clearly promoted and publicised.
- A strategy for raising awareness and ownership of the care leaver support throughout the institution.

Local authorities and other partners

- An understanding of local authority arrangements for the support of looked-after children and care leavers.
- A clear strategy for engaging with local authorities.
- An effective mechanism for two-way communication with local authorities.
- Local authorities identify and refer looked-after children/care leavers.
- Good links with Aimhigher leading to joint work.

Raising aspiration and attainment

- Appropriate programmes targeted at looked-after children/care leavers identified by and referred by local authority partners. Examples of programmes include mentoring, ambassador schemes, summer schools, study skills and confidence-building programmes.

Application stage

- Care leavers included in Compact or similar schemes with offer of enhanced support, reduced tariff points, and additional bursary.
- Agreed methods for identifying care leaver applicants.
- Single named point of contact for care leaver applicants.
- Flexibility in defining care leaver status.
- Appropriate publicity aimed at informing care leaver applicants – web-based and hard copy, and informed by care leaver input.

Arrival and Enrolment

- Clearly identified care leaver co-ordinator who can offer support and signpost to other services.
- Enhanced bursary offer for care leavers as indicated in the Access Agreement.
- Full year accommodation if required.

On- Programme support

- Central care leaver co-ordinator makes regular contact with care leavers in the first weeks of the first term.
- Central care leaver co-ordinator or appropriate Faculty contact continues to make contact as appropriate.
- Embedded support for care leavers once care leaver policy and practice has matured.

Tracking, monitoring, evaluation

- Feedback from care leavers.
- Data on care leavers to enable tracking through the institution and beyond.
- The above to inform an annual report to an institution committee with recommendations for improvement and development.

Who is all this for?

Below is the life-changing experience of J, one care leaver in a supportive Quality Mark university.

J lived in 9 different foster homes from the age of 7 and was finally given a full care order at 15. She got in trouble at school and then dropped out of college at 16. She was fortunate to have support from her foster parents and godmother and after a series of jobs she enrolled for an Access course and then successfully applied for a BA Hons Teacher Training QTS at a HEI.

“It was a disaster. I enjoyed teaching but had no support to continue from the college. I had no friends and I eventually dropped out. I was then working in lots of temp jobs and then I went through the clearing process for university and was accepted straight away. I loved the university, the course and instantly made friends and felt very much at home there.

“It was in my second year when I was at the student information desk and I saw a flyer stating: “Are you a care leaver? Speak to our student support officer Joan for support”, and I asked the woman behind the desk where I could find Joan and she said: “I am Joan”. That was how I got involved in the care leavers stuff.

“I experienced money troubles, not being able to secure work during Easter and Christmas holidays for the short two weeks and with no money coming in from my maintenance allowance from children’s social care during holidays, I struggled. Joan eventually realised and made me sit in her office and apply for an emergency grant from uni which I was accepted for. The holidays were particularly difficult as my young sister used to come and stay with me. I did work every summer as I had a good recruitment agency who could always find me a job during this time but for the short two weeks here and there I found it very difficult financially. In the January of my third year I received the care leavers grant of £750 which was a great surprise and helped me during the Easter when I was unable to work because I was busy writing my dissertation and three 5000 word assignments, without it I probably would have had to work and wouldn’t have got the high 2:1 I achieved. I have to say after meeting Joan I wasn’t ashamed to talk about growing up in care. I now have a mortgage and I’m financially very well. Knowing Joan was there for me to lend an ear when things were particularly bad and knowing that I am now a graduate, with my own life, gives me the energy to fight back.”

J has worked as a family support officer with a county council since March 2008.

Glossary

AoC	Association of Colleges
AMOSSHE	Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education
CRB	Criminal Records Bureau
HE	Higher education
HEI	Higher education institution
FE	Further education
FEC	Further education college
FCA	Foster Care Associations
Foyer	UNIAID accommodation bursary that gives one year's free or supported accommodation to students who are at risk of having to leave university because of extreme hardship
LACES	Looked-after children education support (team)
OFFA	Office for Fair Access

Publications

from Action on Access

- > The Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark: A Practice Guide, March 2010
- > Embedding Success: Learning from Disability Projects in Higher Education, July 2008
- > Higher Education Progression Framework Guide, June 2008
- > University Admissions & Vocational Qualifications: Two Years On, June 2008
- > A Summary Guide to 14-19 Reform: Updated 2008, May 2008
- > Post-16 Education and Disabled Learners, January 2008.
- > Action On Access: Looking to the Future of Widening Participation, December 2007.
- > Disability: A Rough Guide for Widening Participation Practitioners, March 2007.
- > Policy That Works: Widening Participation to Higher Education. December 2006.
- > Progressing to Higher Education: Vocational Qualifications and Admissions, March 2006.
- > The Learner Perspective in Educational Transitions, February 2006.
- > A Summary Guide to 14 – 19 Reform, October 2005.
- > International Comparators of Widening Participation to and through Higher Education: Policy and Practice.
 - Australian Universities, their Students and Social Equity, September 2005.
 - South African Universities, New Developments and the Adult Population, September 2005.
 - Canada: Widening Participation in Rural and Coastal Areas, September 2005.
 - Higher Education in the USA, Student Fees, Financial Aid and Access, November 2005.
 - Sweden, its Universities and Vocational Education, November 2005.
- > Working Together: Aimhigher Governance and Management, A Guide for Partnerships, September 2005.
- > Aimhigher and the Learning and Skills Council: Approaches to Joint Working, July 2005.
- > Making a Difference: The Impact of Aimhigher. A set of 10 case studies, June 2005.
- > Widening Participation: A Rough Guide for Higher Education Providers, April 2005.
- > Student Success in Higher Education, October 2004.

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