

A Home at University

Having somewhere of your own to call home matters. With a stable home at university taken care of, care experienced and estranged young people (CEES) can focus on their studies and make the most of the full university experience. Since 2012, the Unite Foundation has been providing this through a unique scholarship scheme that covers students' rent and bills for up to 3 years.

The data

Data on care experienced and estranged students is still in its infancy. Whilst there is lots more we'd like to know, the data we do have paints a stark picture of under-representation and poorer outcomes.

- + At age 19, only 13% of statutory care leavers are in university, compared with 46% of the wider population¹.
- + 18% drop out within the first year, compared to 10% of non care experienced students².
- + Care experienced students get lower degree classifications: 63.2% achieve a first or 2.1, compared to 76.6% of non care-experienced students³.

Data on estranged students is even more limited, as this isn't collated by HESA, and therefore we know very little about this group of students. We do know they share similar characteristics to care experienced students, studying without family support.

More broadly, data that supports the educational disadvantages of care experienced young people include:

- **Social Market Foundation** published '[Care and Learning in Higher Education](#)':
 - In 2022/23, 9% of children who were in care during the year of their GCSEs achieved "good passes" (grade 5 or above) in English and Maths. For the broader category of anybody that had been a child in need in the past six years, the proportion was 17%. Across the entire pupil population, the proportion was 45%.
 - In 21/22, only 2% of care leavers were admitted to the most selective 'high tariff' universities, compared to 14% of non-care leavers.
- **TASO and the Rees Centre** examined '[Pathways into and through higher education for young people with experience of children's social care](#)'. Findings include:
 - Care leavers – and those who have ever been in care – are four times less likely to enter higher education by age 22, and are also more than twice as likely to drop out compared with their peers in the general population.
 - Young people aged 19 to 21 in England with experience of the care system are three and a half times more likely to be not in education, employment or training, compared with all other children.

¹ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education/2023-24>

² <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-characteristics-data/outcomes-data-dashboard/>

³ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/student-characteristics-data/outcomes-data-dashboard/>

- People with experience of children's social care are more likely to take vocational routes to higher education rather than following the 'traditional pathway' most common in the general population. Around a third of care leavers (36%) and those ever in care (33%) pursued a vocational pathway, compared to just 13% of the general population.
- **Sheffield Hallam University and the University of Oxford**, funded by the Unite Foundation, published ['Positive Impact? Looking at what factors affect access, retention and graduate outcomes for university students with a background of care or family estrangement'](#). They found:
 - When background factors are taken into account, care leavers remain 11 % less likely to attend higher education compared to the general population of young people, and are 38% more likely to withdraw from their studies, even when entry qualifications and other background variables are taken into account.
- + Outcomes for care experienced graduates were broadly similar, on average, to other graduates [...] care experienced graduates did notably better than might have been predicted on the basis of their higher education qualifications, where they did their degree, and their demographic profile.

Why housing?

- + **Lack of family support** – Care experienced and estranged students often do not have a family home to return to during holidays or in times of crisis. This makes secure, year-round housing essential – not just during term time.
- + **Financial vulnerability** – Without family financial support, these students are more likely to face housing insecurity or homelessness. Rent arrears, deposits, and upfront costs can be major barriers.
- + **Stability and well-being** – Stable housing contributes to mental health, academic performance, and overall well-being. Uncertainty around where to live can lead to stress, isolation, and disengagement from studies.
- + **Equity and access** – Housing is a gateway issue – if students can't secure safe and affordable accommodation, they may not be able to attend university at all. This undermines efforts to widen participation and promote social mobility.

There is a wealth of wider evidence and insight that supports this:

- + Students tell us that a safe and secure home at university, year-round, means they can make the most of the full university experience. This is reflected in their progression and completion rates at a statistically higher rate than other care leavers⁴.
- + Students dedicate more time to study as they are not reliant on paid working hours to meet rent, don't have to worry about where they can go during the holidays and are able to save to secure suitable

⁴ https://thisisusatuni.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/UNF_Report_16-9_v6.pdf

housing on graduation. Students report this as *the* most important impact of the Unite Foundation scholarship; it "removed stress and anxiety to allow focus on study"⁵

- + Data from the HEPI/Advanced HE Student Academic Experience Survey shows that care experienced students work on average 11.3 hours/week, and estranged students work 11.1 hours/week, compared to 8.8 hours/week for other students. Work done on minimum income standards for those studying without financial support – e.g. care experienced students – shows that, even with the full maintenance loan, students need to work over 20 hours at minimum wage to achieve the minimum income standard needed to survive at university⁶.
- + As more estranged and care experienced young people become confident that they can have a home at university, we expect this to increase participation from what is a significantly underrepresented group. When asked to identify the factor that was most decisive in making a choice of university, the number one priority was "the level of support available" (11% of care-leavers/9% of estranged students versus under 4% of students from other backgrounds).⁷
- + This was supported by research from UCAS that found students' decision making is influenced by their individual support needs, with three quarters of surveyed applicants taking mental health and well-being support into account (76%), with financial support (64%) and guaranteed accommodation (63%) also important when students research higher education options.⁸
- + The MacAlister review found that the average lifetime cost to the state of statutory care leavers once they've left care is £1.2m per child⁹. We know from research that "Young people who are care leavers who complete their university courses transcend their backgrounds and do at least as well in their future careers as other students"¹⁰ and have the same life outcomes as non-care experienced young people – reducing the cost to the state of health inequalities, involvement with the criminal justice system etc. It could be argued that a housing scholarship is therefore saving the state over £1.1m for every student we support, given a maximum cost of £45k for three years.

Impact of housing

The Unite Foundation commissioned Jisc to undertake an [independent comparative analysis of 10 years of our data](#) to understand whether supporting students with housing made a difference to the outcomes of care experienced and estranged students. Jisc's objective analysis suggests "strong evidence that the scholarship improves educational outcomes of the students we support, specifically in year-to-year progression and completion". Findings include:

- + Unite Foundation students progressed from their 1st to 2nd year of programme within 2 academic years at the same percentage as non-care leaver students (87%) and at a statistically significantly higher percentage compared to the other care leavers groups examined (76%).

⁵ https://thisisusatuni.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Student-Survey-2021_Web.pdf

⁶ <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/a-minimum-income-standard-for-students-2/>

⁷ <https://www.standalone.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/StandAloneUNITEfoundation.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.ucas.com/data-and-analysis/undergraduate-statistics-and-reports/ucas-reports/next-steps-what-experience-students-care-background-education-report>

⁹ <https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Paying-the-Price.pdf>

¹⁰ <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/25839/1/Positive-Impact-Report.pdf>

- + When looking at year 2 to 3 continuation, again within 2 academic years, Unite Foundation students progressed at a greater percentage (86%) than other care-leavers (81%) and within 5 percentage points of the non-care leaver population (91%).
- + 78% of Unite Foundation students achieved a 'good honours' degree within 3 percentage points of non-care leaver students (81%) and at a statistically significantly higher percentage than all other care leaver student groups (70%).

Our scholarship is currently the only intervention evidenced at Office for Students Tier 2 level to impact on progression, completion and attainment of care experienced students.