

Care-Experienced & Care Leaver Students

The Big Idea

Not all students arrive at university with the same support behind them.

Some have grown up in care, or without family support — and that shapes their entire experience of education.



Understanding who these students are is the first step to building a #HomeAtUniversity.

Key Terms: What's The Difference?

The terms care leaver and care experienced are related, but they are not interchangeable. Both originate from children's social care systems and legislation across the UK, but they are used differently when determining eligibility for support.

Care leaver is a legal status with specific criteria attached to it. Care experienced is a broader term that recognises a wider range of care backgrounds. The distinction is particularly important in higher education and student finance, where Scotland and England & Wales use different approaches.

Care Leaver

A legally defined status used across the UK.

Often linked to statutory rights and entitlements, including leaving-care services and ongoing support from local authorities.



Continued

In Scotland, this generally applies to someone who ceased to be looked after on or after their 16th birthday.

In England and Wales, the definition is more restrictive and generally requires a young person to have been in care for at least 13 weeks after the age of 14, including some time aged 16 or over.

In England and Wales, care-leaver status is commonly used by Student Finance bodies and universities when determining eligibility for targeted support.



Focus: a legally defined group entitled to specific support and protections.

Care Experienced

A broader, more inclusive term.

Includes people who have experienced care or a looked-after background at any stage of their life, however brief. May include foster care, residential care, kinship care, being looked after at home under local authority supervision, or adoption from care.

In Scotland, care experienced is the key term used across higher education, widening access and student-support frameworks. Scottish universities and student-support systems are expected to identify and support care-experienced students, not just those who meet the legal definition of a care leaver.

In England and Wales, there is no single agreed definition of care experience, and institutions may apply the term differently.



Focus: recognising a broad range of care backgrounds, regardless of whether someone meets the legal definition of a care leaver.

In Practice

While Care Leaver is the formal designation used in England and Wales (including for funding and statutory support), many universities are broadening their internal approach to “care-experienced”. This allows them to offer more inclusive, bespoke support to students who may not meet the strict legal definition but still face similar challenges.



Continued

Lived Experience

Care-experienced and care leaver students may have experienced:

-  Placement instability (moving between homes or carers)
-  Disrupted education
-  Trauma, loss, and life-changing early experiences
-  Limited or no family support
-  Navigating systems independently from a young age

Not all students will share the same experiences, but many will have reached university entirely against the odds.

What Support Might Be Missing?

Unlike many other students, they may not have access to:

-  A stable home to return to between semesters/terms
-  Family financial support or a safety net
-  Trusted adults for advice and guidance
-  Practical help (moving, setting up accommodation)
-  Emotional reassurance and advocacy



Things that are often “invisible” in university systems make a huge difference day to day.

Impact On Education

These gaps can have real consequences:

-  Higher risk of not progressing or completing
-  Increased stress and mental health challenges
-  Difficulty focusing due to external pressures
-  Barriers to seeking help (due to stigma, awareness, or low trust)



Students aren’t just managing their studies, they’re often managing everything around them too.

Why Housing Is Such A Big Issue

Housing is one of the most critical pressure points. Without a family home to rely on, students may face:

✗ No accommodation outside term time

💰 High and unpredictable housing costs

🔄 Frequent moves and instability

⚠️ Risk of homelessness at transitions



Housing isn't just one issue, it's the foundation that everything else depends on.

What This Means for SU Officers

Understanding this context helps you ask better questions:

? Who is being identified as care-experienced, care leaver

? Where might restrictive definitions be excluding students from support?

? What assumptions is our university making about "home"?

? Are services designed with these experiences in mind?

And importantly:

📢 Challenge "one-size-fits-all" approaches

🔍 Highlight hidden gaps in eligibility and support

🏛️ Push for inclusive definitions and flexible support models



Continued

Key Takeaway

This isn't about labels. It's about:

Recognising different starting points

Understanding hidden inequalities

Designing systems that work for everyone



A #HomeAtUniversity starts with knowing who doesn't already have one.