



A foster carer's guide to inspiring and supporting care leavers to Higher Education

Maria Boffey

rhwydwaith maethu
llais gofal maeth
the fostering network
the voice of foster care



www.fostering.net

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I have burst with joy when I have seen a young person turn their life around and create a better future for themselves by gaining further qualifications. Knowing I have had a part to play makes being a foster carer one of the most special roles I have ever had.

Gail Duffy

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About this guide

This guide is written for foster carers in Wales who are in a position to support and encourage a young person in care who is thinking about applying, or has recently applied, to study at university.

The guide provides practical information and guidance including information with regards to qualifications, choosing the right course, the UCAS application process as well as financial, emotional and general support. The guide also outlines care leaver's support available from each university in Wales, and links to resources and websites detailing more information about student life.

This guide will enable foster carers to provide the level of support and guidance that any good parent would want for any child - helping them to be happy, achieve educational success and develop into successful adults.

Although this guide focuses on access to Higher Education, some of the information is equally applicable to young people studying Further Education. Care leavers will always need their foster carer's support regardless of what qualification they are studying for or working towards.

It is hoped that this guide inspires both foster carers to be ambitious for the children they care for, and for the children and young people themselves to believe that they can aspire and achieve. Being in care should not be a barrier to going to university.

Please note

Higher Education in Wales is constantly evolving. The Fostering Network Wales has made every effort to ensure that the information published in this guide is accurate. However, we cannot accept any liability for the accuracy or content, or for changes made by Higher Education providers. The best source of the most up-to-date information is provided by the university themselves, please refer to the contacts listed on pages 23 and 24.

The information in this guide applies to students who are ordinary resident in Wales before they start their course. If a young person is ordinary resident outside Wales, they will need to apply for funding to their relevant funding authority.

English domicile students apply to Student Finance England: www.direct.gov.uk/studentfinance

Scottish domicile students apply to the Students Awards Agency for Scotland: www.saas.gov.uk

Northern Irish students apply to Student Finance Northern Ireland: www.studentfinancenirni.co.uk

Chapter One

Background and Introduction

1

Background and Introduction

Choosing to study for a degree can be a big decision with so many places, courses and ways to study. It can be overwhelming, especially if you are supporting a care leaver applying to go to university. Care leavers experience additional challenges at a time of leaving care, where other young people will continue to rely on their parents for practical support with such things as being guarantors for accommodation, supplementing the student budget or even subsidising the weekly shop.

But more importantly, care leavers do not normally have the essential element of stability when so many things are in a state of change - new found independence, new friends and a new place to live. As a foster carer, you have an important and vital role to play in providing emotional and practical support in the transition from foster care to university life. Gail Duffy, foster carer, says: 'Making a long term commitment to a young person after they have left care tells them that they were more than a fostered child and I am interested in their future.'

Young people leaving care are one of the most under-represented groups in Further and Higher Education in the UK. Without the support of family, and often struggling to find sufficient money and a place to live, accessing and succeeding in education is a real achievement.

There are no official statistics kept on university entrance for care leavers, but it is estimated that in the UK, only one to two per cent of care leavers go on to Higher Education compared to 43 per cent of all young people (Jackson et al 2006). In Wales, the Welsh Statistics Directorate state that 7 per cent of care leavers aged 19 were in full time higher education in 2011. These statistics are unsurprising given that an 18 year-old care leaver is likely to be dealing with significant emotional and practical disruption, as they learn to cope in the adult world without the security offered by foster care.

Evidence from the *By Degrees* (2005) research project suggests that foster carers can be a key resource for widening participation and opening up opportunities for looked after children - a group that are traditionally educationally and socially excluded.

The guidance that foster carers provide children and young people in care at all stages of their education is invaluable to their eventual academic achievements and their long-term outcomes. Goddard (2010) reinforces the role of the foster carer: 'They are the ones who can give support at home and send a young person practically prepared and psychologically equipped for student life.'

Foster care should be seen as an integral part of the education system, as important as the school, if not more so, in enabling children to fill the gaps caused by irregular attendance and lack of stimulation in their early years.

Foster families can play a crucial role in raising aspirations, enabling young people to achieve the qualifications they need to access further and higher education and supporting them through their degree courses.

Jackson (2005)

Foster carers are the key to ensuring that all looked-after children achieve their potential. It is not surprising that Jackson and colleagues (2005) found young people at university, who have grown up in foster care, report that their placement with foster carers who had a strong commitment to supporting education was the key factor in their educational success. The best foster carers will be ambitious for the children they foster. They will encourage and support their foster children to do well at school, attending school functions and parent evenings, advocating where necessary for the child, arranging supplementary support, helping appropriately with homework, providing necessary home education resources and engaging with other support staff as required.

When my foster carers Julie and Richard said: “You’ve got to go to university,” I didn’t think I was good enough, says Emma. It was never spoken of as an option before. When I was 15 I had all these brilliant ideas but the social workers said: “You’re a million miles away from going to university.”

Cited by Newmark (2010)
‘Reach for the Sky’,
Foster Care, issue.142

For many young people in care, it takes just one person to believe in them. It does not take much for a looked after child to believe they are destined to fail because most people that they come across will expect them to. Sometimes, all it takes is for one person to spend the time, to believe and encourage them to succeed and achieve in life. This is one of the most important roles of being a foster carer.

Fostered children are given lots of negatives in school. You have to counter that. You have to break the cycle of failure and help them to achieve their potential. They can overcome what life has thrown at them.

Julie, Foster Carer

As a key influencer in young people's lives, foster carers play a major role in the decision making process, along with teachers, advisers and their peers. Higher Education might seem a fantastic notion or a vain hope to some young people in foster care. It's hard to encourage and support young people in care to think of their future and make plans. For some, an underlying problem is that they believe there is little point in planning for the future. The first step should be to make them believe they can change their future and with your help, it can happen.

The most important thing a foster carer can do is to be continually positive about the whole concept of Higher Education. Attending university can be one of the most enjoyable and rewarding times of a foster child's life, affording them a whole range of experiences and lifelong friendships that they would not have attained otherwise.

Preparing for university does not happen overnight. The skills that equip students for university life are often learned through early experiences at home and in education.





A Checklist for inspiring and supporting a looked after child's education

As a foster carer, do you....

- Regard foster children as one of your family for as long as they want and not just until they leave care?

- Believe that children and young people in care can have a great future and give them aspirations from a young age?

- Believe that university can be a realistic possibility for children in care – but only if it starts being talked about at a young age?

- Commit yourself to helping children and young people in care succeed?

- Believe education can open doors, increase choices and give more of a chance of a happy and healthy adult life?

- Understand the education system and how to get the best out of it for children and young people in your care?

- Advocate for children and young people in care, ensuring that their needs and rights are being met?

- Provide support, materials and quiet spaces for learning and homework at home? Taking time to help with homework and discuss the school day?

- Encourage and facilitate participation in school trips and activities?

- Make the most of opportunities for learning outside school where children can develop their self-esteem and confidence. (Educational qualifications are essential for university, but it is equally important for young people to be able to demonstrate other learning experiences when it comes to writing the university application)?

- Attend school functions and parent's evenings?

- Celebrate and share the child's achievements?



Case studies: The difference that foster carers make...

Steven is going to study computer forensic science at the University of Glamorgan.

'I've been with Jacqui for nine years. I used just to go to school for the football but I did like information technology. I had lots of friends, got bad reports and was the class clown – Jacqui often went on at me. But she went to meetings with me, talked to the social workers and teachers and told me I had academic ability.'

'I got a C in maths GCSE even though I didn't hand in my coursework. I always wanted to go to university. I'd enjoyed computers in school but doing a BTech in IT at college was another level. Computer forensics is extremely interesting – you analyse computer databases in police investigations. I'm looking forward to university and I'll probably go on to do a master's and join the police. That's where this degree leads.'

'I don't see my birth mother at all but Jacqui's helped me focus on my grades and with the finance, so I can stay with them over the holidays.'

Cheryl has a degree in historical studies from Glasgow University and works in the finance industry.

'I stayed with Linda and Dave for most of the time between 15 and 18. Linda and Dave always helped. They gave me time to get my homework done, took an interest in school and went to parents' meetings.

'It wasn't all plain sailing. You don't really know who you are when you go to university.

'I completed my degree so that I got a good job in the back office of a bank. I'm just about to buy a house, hopefully. I'm still in touch with Linda and Dave. They've always been at the end of a phone for me to help, if my money ran out or I didn't know what to do.'

Emma is completing teacher training, having gained a degree in biological and biomedical psychology from Manchester Metropolitan University.

'I was 15 when I went to Julie and Richard. At first I hated it. I thought they were really strict. It was very stable but I didn't really appreciate it until later. I was so unsettled. I'd slipped from top to bottom sets at school, I'd had medical problems, I didn't like myself. They took me out and bought me £100 of new clothes, got me a haircut, arranged for medical attention. They made me put on make-up every day.

That was Julie's way of helping me like myself and look after myself.'

'Julie has always been there for me as a practical help. She got me a maths tutor and if I hadn't got a C at GCSE I couldn't be a teacher now. Richard will always calm me down. I'm up to my eyes in work now and even though I love it I'll be stressed and ring them up and they'll help me sort myself out.'

Newmark, V. (2010), "Reach for the Sky", Foster Care, issue.142. The Fostering Network

Chapter Two

Higher Education explained

2

Higher Education explained

The benefits of Higher Education

Gaining a degree can significantly increase and improve a young person's career prospects. They will not only have a wider variety of career options to choose from once they have a degree, but they are likely to progress much faster up the career ladder. Whilst it would be misleading to claim that a degree guarantees employment, an increasing number of organisations require people to have degrees before applying. Graduates can earn, on average, 20% more over their lifetime (for women it rises to 40%). All courses, whatever the subject, offer transferable skills, time management, the ability to write clearly, team work and presentation skills. Some, for example, such as teaching, nursing, and architecture, will lead directly to a profession.

However, many people believe that going to university is even more important for personal development. For example, often the friendships made at university are the ones that last for life. It is an opportunity to meet new people from many different and varied backgrounds, to develop social and personal skills.

More importantly for care leavers, university life is an opportunity for them to find their own feet and develop their own identity without the label of having been in care. Goddard (2010) argues that universities are the best solutions to the problems that young people face in leaving care. He argues that it gives them a chance to reinvent themselves and 'take a breather'.

However, the majority of participants, looking back over their university experience, said that they had thoroughly enjoyed it and learnt a great deal. They felt it had given them an opportunity to mature and acquire social and life skills gradually instead of being precipitated into adult life like most care leavers.

Ajayi, Jackson, and Quigley (2005)

A definition of Higher and Further Education

Because of the many changes in recent years, including institutions changing their names and titles, many are confused about the differences between Higher and Further Education. Here is a brief definition:

► Further Education (FE)

Further Education is post-compulsory education for people over the age of 16 that does not take place in a secondary school. Qualifications can be either academic or vocational, depending on their goal. To study a Level 3 qualification, you usually need to have a Level 2 qualification – GCSEs, BTEC First Diploma/Certificate, Apprenticeship or NVQ 2.

► Higher Education (HE)

Higher Education is the name given to education beyond Further Education. Higher Education qualifications include degree courses, postgraduate courses and Higher National Diplomas. You can study for these qualifications at universities and colleges, through distance learning or specialist colleges. You usually need a Level 3 qualification to progress on to Higher Education, however, there are many routes to Higher Education, not just through A Levels.

South West Wales Reaching Wider Partnership (2011)

The definition of a degree and its classifications

A degree is a course that is studied and qualified for at university. There are two types – a Foundation or a Bachelor's degree. Both can also carry an indication as to the subject, e.g. FDEng is a Foundation Degree in Engineering while BEng is a Bachelor's degree. Foundation degrees bridge the gap between employment and studying and have a strong focus on the development of work skills. The entry qualifications are less than a Bachelor's degree. Foundation degrees are not classified whilst a Bachelor's degree will be classed as 1 (first class), 2.1, 2.2 or 3 (third), depending on marks. The marks required for each vary between universities but undergraduates (an undergraduate being a college or university student who has not yet received a bachelor's or similar degree) will be notified of the marking schemes and what they are likely to achieve each year.

Undergraduate Higher Education entry requirements

When a young person is choosing education options at 16, it's important to find out what qualifications and grades they are likely to need for the type of higher education course they want to want to study.

There are many different educational routes into university, but GCSE's and A levels are the most common. GCSE subjects are chosen during school Year Nine and young people will need help to make the best choices for them. Most GCSE courses require coursework and there is potential for this work to be lost if the young person in care is moved between placements. You can help by ensuring that any course work is stored securely, on an external hard drive or a cloud (remote IT file storage) for example.

Universities and colleges set their own entry requirements for higher education courses, so they vary widely. Depending on the course, UK students may be able to enter higher education with a range of qualifications which can include:

- ▶ GCSE's.
- ▶ GCE's.
- ▶ A levels.
- ▶ National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs).
- ▶ BTEC National Diplomas and Certificates.
- ▶ Key Skills qualifications.
- ▶ Advanced Diploma qualifications.
- ▶ International Baccalaureate.
- ▶ Access courses.
- ▶ HNC/HND (Higher National Certificate and Higher National Diplomas).
- ▶ DipHE (Diploma of Higher Education).
- ▶ Foundation and Access courses.
- ▶ Other specialist and professional qualifications.

Many children and young people in care will have experienced a disrupted education and some may even be late starters. There is no rule that a young person must sit exams at a particular age, so it is possible for them to sit examinations later and qualify for university.

It's important to remember that there's no set route into education – and you don't have to have all of the answers right now. As a care leaver, you could still be entitled to support until you turn 25. Lots of people make the decision to go back to education at all times of life and for all sorts of reasons. Whatever your journey has been, there's always a way to get back into education.

The Who Cares Trust (2012)

Entry requirements are listed on the UCAS website under each Higher Education course's entry profile, visit www.ucas.ac.uk/students/coursesearch for more information. Check the entry requirements before the young person begins their university application process so that they know what to expect.

The Open University



The Open University is often a great option for older care leavers who might have other commitments such as a full or part-time job and/or dependent children.

If they have a job they can do this alongside their studies. And the Open University doesn't have any entry requirements, so they don't need to worry that they might be turned down.

You can find out more about opportunities at the Open University by visiting: www.open.ac.uk/study/ or phone: **029 2047 1170**

Chapter Three

The road to university

3

The road to university

Career options available at 16 years-old.

Higher Education is just one of the many options that are available at 16 years-old. Other options may include staying on at school; sixth-form college; further education; work based learning or getting a job. The young person does not have to make career choices by themselves. For more information about the choices and options at 16, encourage the young person to talk to a careers adviser and visit www.careerswales.com.

It helps hugely for a young person to have seen a professional careers advisor at some point leading up to decision, so that their own ideas and potential choices for an education path and eventual career can be discussed impartially. It would also help you to have sight of the outcome of that discussion in the form of an action plan, which would have been drawn up at the interview.

As a foster carer you are not expected to be a careers advisor but it helps enormously if you explore and talk through the options and find out as much as possible.

The importance of the Pathway Plan

Right from the beginning, our Pathway Plans have focused on university....we were always told about the available support. Everyone – our social workers, the leaving care team - have been behind our dream.

Tim, care leaver and undergraduate,
interviewed by the Who Cares Trust (2011)

For young people in care, forward planning is extremely important. Details of their chosen route should be recorded in the Personal Education Plan (PEP) and the subsequent Pathway Plan (16 plus). If a fostered young person is thinking about going to college or university make sure that this is noted in both plans. This is essential to ensure that they get funding and support. Local authorities have a legal duty to support young people making the transition from care to adulthood.

The Pathway Plan sets out the activities and support for any looked after young person planning to move to independent living and is based on their care plan. It is a document drawn up by the responsible local authority, along with the young person, which sets out

the manner in which the local authority proposes to meet the young person's needs. The Pathway Plan needs to be aspirational and led by the young person to ensure that it remains relevant and focused on achieving the best outcomes for them over time.

In my experience, the transition to university for care leavers with a detailed Pathway Plan is much better than those without. Ideally, a Pathway Plan should include what financial support the local authority will provide for the duration of the course, their accommodation options in vacation period and any other supporting needs. By discussing these issues and having it in the Pathway Plan, the young person knows where they stand before they start their course and can plan better for their future.

Einir Evans
Student Support Officer,
Cardiff University.

Foster carers should also have written information about the financial implications for themselves and the leaving care arrangement.

The role of the Personal Advisor

A Personal Advisor is the person who is appointed by the responsible local authority for overseeing the Pathway Plan and ensuring that the young person receives the support to which he or she is entitled to in a co-ordinated and accessible way. They will be the main point of contact between a young person and his or her responsible local authority. The personal adviser will act as a mentor to the young person and will take steps to strike an appropriate balance in respect of what the young person wants and what a good parent would be expected to do. The extended arrangements ensure that young people living in and leaving care are able to identify with someone who is committed to their well being and continuing development on a long-term basis.

Deferred entry - taking a Gap Year

A care leaver may choose to defer university entry and take a gap year after they leave school and before they start higher education. A year out can be a great opportunity for them to have a break from academia, earn, gain invaluable experience, meet new people, gain independence and learn new skills. However, it is important they have a goal, rather than just taking a year off to aimlessly do nothing. It is worth noting that some departments (mostly maths and chemistry) prefer students to enter university straight after A-levels. It is important to ask about this at university open days.

In some instances, the young person may have originally planned to continue straight into higher education, but after sitting exams would like to take a gap year. In this situation they have two options. Firstly, they should contact the admissions tutor and find out if it is possible to defer their entry to the next academic year, providing justification

relating to the course where possible. If this is not an option, they may withdraw their application and apply again through UCAS the following year – this should be given serious consideration as there is no guarantee they will receive the same offers.

Universities, colleges and future employers support gap years as they see the value when students grow in confidence, have a more mature outlook and a greater focus and commitment when they return to their studies. Gap year students are usually more broad-minded and confident, having made the decision to do something different, discover a lot about themselves and meet new challenges. They have usually spent some time away from home thus being more independent and used to handling finances.

If a young person intends to take a gap year, they should outline their plan in their UCAS personal statement when making their application. It is important the young person secures their university place before they start their gap year.

There are various options open to the young person. Probably the first decision should be whether they wish to travel, or remain in the UK. They could work in the UK for six months to earn money to then fund six months travelling abroad. Or they may choose to work their way around the world whilst taking in the sights and new experiences this will afford.

Foster carers often ask what happens if a young person in care, aged 18, travels for a couple of years doing voluntary work abroad (gap years) and returns at 21 years-old - will their local authority still pay for them to go to university?

The law says that as a 'qualifying' care leaver they are entitled to continue receiving support from their local authority up to the age of 25. If they return at 21 years-old, and go to university, then their local authority must say how they propose to support them and include this in their Pathway Plan. This must, in any case, include their university bursary of £2,000 and any financial support they need for accommodation during vacation times.



Gap years

- ▶ www.gapyearjobs.co.uk helps to find the best job for the gap year. Whether it's adventure, catering, hospitality, charity, leisure, sport or travel and tourism.



Work experience

- ▶ www.gowales.co.uk offers a range of services to help students including work placements, funding for training, online database of jobs in Wales and the Graduate Academy.
- ▶ www.volunteering-wales.net details local volunteering opportunities.
- ▶ www.unaexchange.org This charity has a programme of opportunities. Volunteers can take part in community-led projects in over 40 countries, lasting from two weeks to twelve months. 2011 highlights included turtle conservation projects in Mexico, activities for orphans in Moldova and working at an eco-lodge and organic farm in Israel.

Chapter Four

Making choices

4

Making choices

Once the young person has decided that they want to study at university, there are a series of steps that they need to undertake in order to begin the process of choosing a degree course and an institution.

The application process can seem complex and so the young person will need their foster carer's help and guidance. In order to help things move along smoothly you should be aware of the application process in its entirety, including the deadlines for the UCAS application and student funding. It is important to list key dates so it is known what needs to be done each school term and ensure that the young person does not miss any deadlines and thus miss out on any opportunities available to them.

Choosing the right university and course

Foster carers can have an important role to play when it comes to supporting university choice and selection. Choosing the right university for an individual is important, some students leave university within their first year because they chose the wrong place.

There are a number of issues for the young person to consider when thinking as to which university and course may best suit them.

These issues include the proximity of the campus to their foster family, birth family or friends may be a consideration, providing always that their home town university offers a suitable course. For others, moving away may be the best option.

Some universities have totally integrated campuses on the edge of towns or in the countryside with all the facilities and accommodation together. This may be appealing to some and it is easier to make friends and feel part of a wider community. Other universities occupy split sites in the centre of large towns and cities. This may mean that student accommodation and sports facilities are some distance away. Considerations here may include transport costs or personal safety when travelling at night. On the other hand, large cities offer a whole range of social and cultural facilities that smaller towns do not and this may be appealing if the young person is going to live in the area during vacation periods when other students have returned home.

Also consider where the degree course is being offered. Many universities are based on split sites. The actual site could be some distance from the main campus involving a lot of time travelling to-and-fro each day and associated travel expenses. Remote sites may have fewer facilities, for example - limited internet access or catering, and it may be necessary to return to the main campus to use the library or other learning facilities.

University league tables include information on the quality of teaching and research in key subjects. This can be particularly important if they are thinking of going on to postgraduate study. League tables are published by newspapers such as *The Times*, visit www.timeshighereducation.co.uk

When looking at league tables, it is important to look at all aspects of a university's rating and not just the overall score. Universities receive a score for many different factors, including sport facilities, libraries, IT facilities, student life, research, teaching quality and location, for example.

The cost of university accommodation will vary from place to place, and within the same university, depending on the facilities available. University accommodation used to be called living in halls of residence. Most now have flats either on campus – or close by. Most flats are shared between three and nine people and usually there is an individual study bedroom and a shared kitchen. Some have en-suite bathrooms. The advantages are that there are always people around and there is usually an on-site manager or warden. The disadvantages are that the young person may get very little privacy and may feel less secure than living in their own flat. Sometimes, other students may pressure others to join in activities when they want to study or they might hold a party when they have an essay to complete.

Some universities have special arrangements for care leavers so that they can stay in university accommodation over the holidays (year-long accommodation) and stay there for the full three or four years. Others may give priority access to, or even a guaranteed place in university accommodation. See pages 23 and 24.

University choices

For the best source of information with regard to university choice visit www.ucas.com.



There are a number of other sites which will give more personal, less formal, information on different courses and institutions, visit:

- ▶ www.ukcoursefinder.com locates the ideal university courses. An online questionnaire pinpoints interests in 150 plus degree disciplines.
- ▶ www.push.co.uk is an independent guide to UK universities, student life, gap years, open days, student finance and anything student related.
- ▶ www.unofficial-guides.com/universities provides alternative Higher Education information for prospective undergraduates.

Chapter Five

General support whilst at university

5

General support whilst at university

The range of support offered at university institutions

As well as financial support, universities also provide a range of other support services dedicated to helping students make the most of university life. Each university differs but you can expect most universities to have some form of student support service.

Most universities will provide a disability service to support disabled applicants and current students, including those with specific learning difficulties, sensory impairments, physical impairments, long term medical conditions and mental health difficulties including information on the type of support they may need.

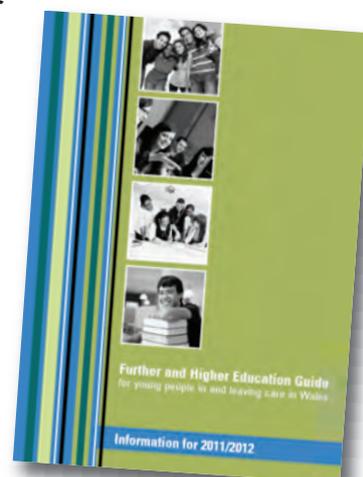
Counselling Services at universities can provide a safe space to talk for any student who is finding that their emotional or psychological concerns are affecting their studies and life in general. Professional counsellors can provide relevant support through brief therapy service, workshop programmes or through online and other resources.

Most student support services will have advisers to provide advice and guidance on a number of issues that can include help with student funding (including undergraduate, postgraduate and NHS funding), academic related matters, welfare issues, childcare, money, debt, benefits and housing.

Most universities will have a student support service for international students also. They can provide advice on visas, employment, housing, finance and daily life in the UK.

Universities who have a student support service will have dedicated pages on their website that provides further information. If you type *Student Support* in the search boxes of university websites it will link you to the relevant web pages.

For more detailed information on support available to care leavers in Welsh universities download a free copy of the **Further and Higher Education Guide for young people in and leaving care in Wales: Information for 2011/2012** from www.swansea.ac.uk/undergraduate/student-services/care-leavers/



Support for care leavers



The Buttle UK Quality Mark

Many care leavers worry about the loneliness and financial insecurity that can happen at university. Graduate and care leaver, Cheryl, said: 'I couldn't just go on holiday like the other students: I had to arrange it all in advance with social services. It would have really helped if I'd had somewhere to stay, especially in the first year, and someone to talk to on the campus.' (cited by Newmark 2010)

Many universities now do offer just that, spurred on by Buttle UK, which awards a Buttle UK Quality Mark to Higher Education institutions that actively support and encourage care leavers.

In gaining the Quality Mark Award, an institution is expected to raise the aspirations and achievement of care leavers. Quality Mark institutions are required to offer a range of support that includes help with year-round accommodation, bursaries and a designated member of staff as the key contact for students from a care background.

The four broad quality marks for care leaver criteria are:

1. To raise aspirations and achievements.
2. To have appropriate admissions procedures.
3. To provide entry and ongoing support.
4. To monitor the implementation of the Commitment.

Most colleges and universities in Wales go beyond offering the usual Open Day providing a care leaver mentors and additional financial support specifically for care leavers.

Look out for the Buttle UK Quality Mark on university literature – or type *care leaver* into a university web page search box.

Ticking the Care leaver box on the UCAS application form

It is vital that care leavers tick the box on the UCAS application form stating they have spent time in care or if they prefer, notify the designated member of staff at the institution (see pages 23 and 24). Some colleges of Further Education have a similar tick box on their application form. Universities and colleges will treat the answer in confidence - the information will not be circulated to other staff, departments, tutors, etc unless the young person gives permission for that to happen. The information will be used to contact the young person to discuss whether or not they may need any extra resources or support to undertake their chosen course. It may also enable access to additional financial support.

Specialist university support and designated contacts for care leavers

If the young person is considering going to a particular institution then it is strongly recommended that they get in touch with them using these contact details to confirm the support that they offer. This is especially important for advice concerning financial support. They will be happy to hear from young people and their foster carers. Please refer to this table for contact details:

| University | Care leaver support contact | 52 week accommodation | Care leavers bursary | Pre-entry support | Funding and advice | Website Link |
|---------------------------------|---|-----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--|
| Aberystwyth University | Debra Croft dec@aber.ac.uk 01970 621890 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | www.aber.ac.uk |
| Bangor University | Wendy Williams wendy.williams@bangor.ac.uk 01248 383637 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | www.bangor.ac.uk |
| Cardiff Metropolitan University | Emma Cook financeadvice@cardiffmet.ac.uk 029 2041 6170/ 6333 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | www.uwic.ac.uk |
| Cardiff University | Einir Evans evansE23@cardiff.ac.uk 0290 20 9 2087 4844 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | www.cardiff.ac.uk |
| Glyndŵr University | Beryl Dixon b.dixon@glyndwr.ac.uk 01978 293547 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | www.glyndwr.ac.uk |
| Swansea University | Asad Rahman a.rahman@swansea.ac.uk 01792 513393 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | www.swan.ac.uk |

Continued:

| University | Care leaver support contact | 52 week accomodation | Care leavers bursary | Pre-entry support | Funding and advice | Website Link |
|---|---|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--|
| Swansea Metropolitan University | Paul Davies davidpaul.davies@smu.ac.uk | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | www.smu.ac.uk |
| University of Glamorgan | Kelly Symonds ksymond1@glam.ac.uk 01443 482969 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | www.glam.ac.uk |
| University of Wales Newport | Lena Crookes lena.crookes@newport.ac.uk 01633 432064 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | www.newport.ac.uk |
| University of Wales Trinity Saint David (Lampeter Campus) | Lynda Lloyd-Davies l.lloyd-davies@tsd.ac.uk 01570 424761 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | www.trinitysaintdavid.ac.uk |
| University of Wales Trinity Saint David (Carmarthen Campus & Distance Learners) | Delyth Lewis d.lewis@tsd.ac.uk 01267 6767947 | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | www.trinitysaintdavid.ac.uk |

Chapter Six

Financial support

6

Financial support

Along with what and where they want to study, care leavers will no doubt be thinking about the cost of going to university. There is plenty of information available to help them in their choice.

For students thinking of studying NHS funded courses such as nursing, radiography, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and dental therapy and hygiene, the funding is slightly different. For more information visit the NHS Wales Awards Unit website <http://www.wales.nhs.uk/sitesplus/829/page/36092>

For students who normally live in Wales prior to starting their course, and who are not on an NHS funded course, they need to apply to Student Finance Wales for funding. Visit www.studentfinancewales.co.uk. They can apply by logging in and using the online application or download a hard copy of the PN1 form. They can also contact their Local Education Authority for an application form. Applications usually open in March before they begin their course.

Even though the sums involved may seem intimidating, the student finance system is designed so that students do not need to find money up-front to pay tuition fees. There is a grant and a loan available to pay for tuition fees. They will receive financial support in the form of loans, grants, bursaries and scholarships to pay for their living costs. Any loan taken out will not have to be repaid until they have finished their course and are earning above a particular threshold (currently £21,000 per year). The amount to be repaid is linked to their income (currently 9% of their income over £21,000). Any loan that is outstanding after 30 years of finishing their course, will be written off.

It is important to note that not all debt is the same. It's easy for some to think, 'I've got to get a student loan, why not borrow a little more?' It is important for the young person to understand the unique nature of the student loan service - there is no other loan available where repayments are dependent on income. Further, other types of loans are not time-limited and will never go away, pursuing payment even if the individual can't afford it - the interest is always higher and will multiply at speed. There needs to be a very clear understanding about the implications in engaging in others forms of borrowing money to fund Higher Education.

Generally, care leavers entering Higher Education will be regarded as having independent status i.e. an independent student that is no longer expected to rely on parental support. They must prove estrangement at the beginning of their course. A letter confirming their status from the Local Authority should be sufficient. However, if the young person is living with a partner this might be taken into consideration.

Student finance



For general information on the costs of university education and the financial support available in Wales (including an explanation of student loans and how to repay them) visit www.studentfinancewales.co.uk.

Visit www.moneysavingexpert.com and type *student* into the search box.

Fees, grants and loans – a summary of the types of financial support available

Tuition Fees

From 2012/13 Welsh universities can charge Tuition Fees of up to £9,000 per academic year. However, there is no expectation for students to pay this all up-front while they study. A Tuition Fee Loan and a new Tuition Fee Grant are available from the Welsh Government via Student Finance Wales to cover the fees students are being charged.

Tuition Fee Loans are paid directly to the university by the Student Loans Company. All eligible students can take out a Tuition Fee Loan as it is not means tested. For Welsh domiciled students in 2012/13, the maximum Tuition Fee Loan they can take out is £3,465.

A New Tuition Fee Grant will also be available specifically for Welsh domiciled students. The Tuition Fee Grant will cover the remaining fees being charged. For example, for a university charging £9,000 per year a student will receive a Tuition Fee Loan of £3,465 and a Tuition Fee Grant of £5,535. The Tuition Fee Grant will be paid directly to the university that they attend, will not be means tested and is non-repayable.



Living costs

All students, if eligible, can apply for a Maintenance Loan and an Assembly Learning Grant (ALG) to help meet the cost of living while they study. The Maintenance Loan will need to be repaid in the same way as the Tuition Fee Loan when they finish their course. The Assembly Learning Grant is non-repayable.

The amount of Assembly Learning Grant and Maintenance Loan available is dependent on the household income. As a care leaver is generally treated as an independent student, they should be entitled to the maximum support. In 2012/13 the maximum **Assembly Learning Grant is £5,000** and the maximum **Maintenance Loan is £1,901**.

Bursaries and scholarships

In addition to the financial support provided by Student Finance Wales, most universities will offer their own financial support. This may take the form of a bursary or scholarship; these will all have their own eligibility criteria and are often only available to a limited number of qualifying students. Each institution will decide how much support they offer and who they offer it to. Care leavers are often a priority group for universities, so it is worth checking whether the young person meets their criteria. Bursaries and scholarship do not have to be repaid.

Bursaries and scholarships may be paid in cash, but might also be paid in other ways such as a fee-waiver. This is a reduction in the level of fees that are charged for either a particular year of study or an entire course.

Charity funding and grants

There are some charities that provide grants for care leavers at university. The Education Grants Advisory Service (EGAS) provides the most up to date information about what's available. Visit www.egas-online.org.uk. For a list of organisations who offer funding opportunities and grants visit www.unigrants.co.uk

The Buttle Trust UK was established to ensure that children and young people in need are given a brighter future. They do this through a range of grant programmes that are designed to provide vulnerable individual children and families the support they need to overcome immediate crisis, or ensure the best possible opportunity for a successful education. For further information visit <http://www.buttleuk.org/pages/grant-programmes.html>

Disabled students

If the young person has a specific or non-specific learning disability or any other disability they may be entitled to the Disabled Student Allowance to assist with additional costs related to studying and having a disability. Visit www.studentfinancewales.co.uk

Young or lone parents

There is additional financial support available to assist students who have dependant children from Student Finance Wales. These are means tested and include a Parental Learning Allowance (max £1,508 in 2012/13) and a Childcare Grant which can pay up to 85% of registered childcare costs. Visit <http://www.childcare.co.uk/>

International students

If you are fostering a young person who wants to go university and is an unaccompanied asylum seeker, the arrangements for fees and their entitlements will depend on whether their immigration status has been agreed by the Home Office.

Financial Support from Local Authorities

Despite the above information about this funding being available, the local authority responsible for young people in their care, as corporate parents, should still provide them with adequate financial, practical and emotional support during their studies.

The Care Leavers Higher Education Bursary

Care leavers starting university before their 25th birthday are entitled to a bursary of a minimum of £2,000 from their local authority. They should apply directly to them. This may be paid in a lump sum or in instalments; the timings of bursary payments are agreed between the care leaver and the local authority. As it is a bursary, the Care Leavers Higher Education Bursary does not have to be repaid.

It is a common belief that local authorities do not have to pay a Higher Education Bursary at the full amount if it provides other financial support. The Higher Education Bursary is a legal requirement. Section 23C of the Children Act 1989 requires a local authority to pay a Higher Education Bursary to former relevant children who pursue a course in higher education in accordance with their Pathway Plan. Accompanying regulations deal with the payment arrangements that local authorities need to put in place to pay former relevant children who undertake such a course. These regulations prescribe the meaning of higher education for the purpose of determining eligibility for the bursary and set the broad framework for arrangements in relation to the timing of payments.

The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000 and guidance details how local authorities should support care leavers. Each local authority will have its own protocols regarding the Act.

Student budgeting

The Student Calculator is a tool to help current or prospective undergraduates work out how much money they will have at university, and how much they will need. Visit www.studentcalculator.org.uk



Accommodation

Accommodation is one of the most important, and yet, one of the biggest expenses of university life. Students are entitled to rent payments by the responsible authority. If the young person already has tenancy and wants to study in another area, then arrangements should be made between the young person and the local authority as to how best to secure their home for the duration of the course.

For some care leavers, it may be possible that they may lose their home if they decide to move away to go to university or if they decide to live on campus. This depends on their local authority and they must talk to them. They will also need to check if they will be considered to have made themselves homeless when they finish university and want to return to their own area. They must get very clear answers to these questions before giving up a tenancy.

Under the Children Leaving Care Act 2000, local authorities have a duty to secure accommodation for care leavers during vacations.

Most leaving care services offer a setting up home allowance for young people when they move into their first home. This will enable them to purchase the basic equipment they will need such as furniture, towels, bed linen and crockery. Care leavers going to university are entitled to the same support if they are not going to live in furnished accommodation provided by the university.

A maintenance loan (see page 28) will cover some of the everyday living costs but it is likely to need supplementing with funds from the local authority.

IT provision

Having access to IT equipment is almost a pre-requisite for university study. Each institution will give access to such equipment, but it may prove difficult to access at busy times or if the young person is living off campus. Most local authorities will make provision for this either on a temporary or permanent basis.

Special Guardianship Orders - a note for foster carers

Some foster carers worry that applying for a Special Guardianship Order (SGO) for a young person may detrimentally affect funding for university and that as foster carers, they will be financially worse off.

When applying for an SGO, the local authority must undertake an assessment for support services, if this is requested. The assessment will include the needs of the LAC, the parenting capacity of the special guardian, the family environment, care leaving services and the need for financial support. The prospective special guardian should set out the full financial needs of post-18 support they expect to be included in the support package. These financial needs should have been set out in the Pathway Plan.

It is advisable that foster carers negotiate with the responsible authority during the assessment process, to ensure the support package reflects the recognized needs before the draft is submitted to the court. A draft support package will be considered at the same time as the SGO application.

Financial support is means tested, but the local authority may disregard the foster carers means in specific circumstances. Support packages are reviewed annually or earlier if there is a significant change in circumstances. The special guardian must submit an annual statement to the local authority for the review of the support package. If the local authority decides to change or terminate the financial support, notice must be given and time given for representations to be made.

Additionally, young people, aged 16 to 20, who were looked after immediately prior to an SGO being made, may qualify for advice and assistance under the Children Act 1989, section 24. A local authority may offer the same level of support to young people subject to an SGO as they do to care leavers. Access to this should be considered as part of the review of the support package.

Support and Resources

Foster carers applying for a Special Guardianship Order, and are members of the Fostering Network, should seek legal advice either from the Fostering Network Legal Advice line 0844 581 0404 or instruct a solicitor specialising in family/childcare law.

Detailed information is available in The Fostering Network's *Special Guardianship*, in the *Signpost Series*. It is available to download from the membership section of the Fostering Network website. Visit www.fostering.net

Or call:

Family Rights Group 0808 801 0366 or **Child Law Advice Line** 0808 802 0008

Visit the **Children's Legal Centre** www.childrenslegalcentre.com

Children and young people's rights



- ▶ **www.childcom.org.uk** The Children's Commissioner for Wales has responsibility for protecting children's rights as set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- ▶ **www.voiceyp.org** Voice is a national charity committed to empowering children and young people in care and in need.
- ▶ **www.nyas.net** The National Youth Advocacy Service is a charity providing information, advice, advocacy and legal representation to young people and vulnerable adults in England and Wales.

Chapter Seven

Helping young people research Higher Education options

7

Helping young people research Higher Education options

Where to start when choosing a university and course

There is a multitude of information and people available to help the young person make their choice of university and course. A good starting point is for you, as a foster carer, is to help them to collate all the necessary information. A careers adviser may provide university prospectuses or brochures, while university websites will contain information about courses, their content and potential outcomes, as well as helpful advice about locations and social life.

People will talk about their own university experiences, their birth or foster children's or somebody else that they know - but they don't know your foster child or his/her expectations, strengths and weaknesses. You can help them begin to get a broad idea by encouraging them to talk to people who have been to university, current students, tutors and teachers. Additionally, encourage them to read web blogs and visit universities.

Offering advice to the young person about their choice of degree course and university is a positive way to assist them in their decision making process - provided it is done in the right way and with the best of intentions and resources. Be mindful not to base your advice on your own experience of school or university from years ago. Things have moved on since then, to the point where most universities will be unrecognisable to an older generation. The process has changed beyond recognition, with computerisation, tuition fees and unprecedented levels of choice. Additionally, university life itself will have altered significantly in terms of students potentially having to earn throughout their degree, for example, and certainly from a social perspective.

Initially, it is easy to feel out of your depth and at a total loss on where to start and just what to advise. By following this advice, you will at least be confident in the knowledge of not only where to find answers to questions, but also whom to speak to. The advice and support you offer will be based on sound, up to date and relevant information.



Choosing a university and course



- ▶ **www.prospects.ac.uk** Provides information, advice and opportunities to students and graduates.
- ▶ **www.uni4me.com** Has been developed as an introduction to higher education for young people and their parents and carers. It explains the how and why of university with useful information about studying, student life and finance.
- ▶ **www.realuni.com** The alternative prospectus providing student-written advice and information on all aspects of applying for university, builds profiles of universities, and allows contact with students across the country.
- ▶ **www.unistats.com** A website where you can search, review and compare subjects at UK universities and colleges. It includes the results of the latest National Student Survey.
- ▶ **www.ukcoursefinder.com** Includes an online questionnaire to help choose the right course for locating the ideal university course. Quick to complete, the study interests questionnaire pin-points interests in 150+ degree disciplines.

University outreach services

It can be difficult talking about university as a possible option if you have little knowledge of university life, and nobody in your immediate family or circle of friends has been an undergraduate. Most universities offer outreach services to young people aged 14 years onwards. This may seem too early to be thinking about options, but outreach can help with motivation and planning for the future if the young person knows what might be available.

Outreach describes the activities and support that an institution offers to encourage young people to apply to study in higher education in general, and with them in particular, along with the support that they may offer to help with the UCAS application process. Its focus is on the support that is offered to the applicant before they arrive at university. Outreach activities might include:

- ▶ Summer schools, campus tours and taster sessions to offer an experience of student life and help prospective students decide whether a particular institution is suitable for them.
- ▶ Some institutions offer a dedicated person who can offer advice on making an application: this might be advising on the suitability of a particular course or offering specific help with completing the UCAS application form.
- ▶ Compact schemes. These schemes aim to encourage participation in Higher Education by students who might not normally consider going to university. They might offer support with their current studies, the opportunity to sample future degree options and assistance with their application.

- ▶ Summer schools, which can result in the young person receiving a different offer based not just on academic performance.
- ▶ Mentoring opportunities where a young person is matched with a current student as a mentor. They can keep in touch through specific mentoring websites.

For details of who to contact for more information about outreach services see pages 23 and 24.

University Open Days

As a foster carer, one of the most important things that you can do in helping make the decision, is give your support to university open days - whether it is prior to the open day visit or actually attending the day. Your involvement will demonstrate a clear commitment to the young person and will enable you to feel engaged with the whole application process. Universities expect parents and guardians to attend their open days.

Open days are not selection tests, but rather an ideal opportunity for the young person to explore whether an institution or course is right for them. Open days give the opportunity to speak to academics. At these events, you can find out from lecturers and students both the positive and negative aspects of university life; tour the learning facilities; campus and accommodation and explore the social life. Even walking around the campus and sitting in the coffee bar will give a feel for the university and help decide if they would like to spend three years of their life there. Further, visiting the institution beforehand will go a long way in alleviating any anxiety undergraduates might feel on their first day.

It's a good idea to narrow down the choice of university and then attend a number of open days. These are large events and most universities hold several in a year. Young people often attend these at the end of Year 11 or in Year 12. Visiting days are generally department based and take place in the winter/spring after application. A full list of open days, as well as further advice and resources, can be found on www.opendays.com. If you miss the open days or cannot make them, some universities offer a one-to-one advice and escorted visit service, for this you will need to ring the individual institution and talk to staff in Recruitment or Admissions, or visit their individual websites.

Financial assistance may be available from the local authorities to help with the cost of attending open days and interviews – enquire with the responsible Aftercare or Leaving Care team.



How to make the most of a university Open Day

- a foster carer's guide

Before the Open Day

- ▶ Make a point of visiting more than one university so that the young person can make comparisons and ultimately make a more informed choice.
- ▶ Make sure the young person doesn't attend the open day alone. It's important for them to have somebody to discuss things with. Someone to give an honest second opinion and ask additional questions.
- ▶ Encourage the reading of the university prospectus before arrival – making sure the structure and content of the course is what the young person wants.
- ▶ Help gather as much information as possible whether it's from school, the library or via the internet.
- ▶ Encourage the young person to read alternative guides, they offer another perspective.
- ▶ Think about questions you both want to ask before you arrive and make a note of them.
- ▶ Take a look at the programme of events before you arrive to find out what activities will be happening on the day. Decide exactly what you want to see and do beforehand as this will help you plan your day.
- ▶ If applicable, ask about available disability support, for learners with physical disabilities as well as 'hidden' disabilities such as dyslexia. Disclosure of a disability or mental health difficulty at an early stage such as the open day will assist the institution to start planning for any support requirements the young person might have. If they have a disability or specific learning difficulty, it is advisable to contact individual institutions before submitting the UCAS application to discuss the support they may need.
- ▶ Ask about any additional funding i.e. bursaries and scholarships for care leavers.



Attending the Open Day

- ▶ University open days can attract thousands of visitors, with the morning session being the busiest. If the young person is interested in just one course or Academic School, you may want to consider arriving for the afternoon as the groups attending in the afternoon are usually smaller. If you wait until the end of the day, activities will be much quieter and you'll be surprised how much can be fitted in.
- ▶ Break the day up, especially if you are making a long journey – the last thing you want is to jump straight into a guided tour without a break.
- ▶ Try to see areas of the university that are not normally on the visitors' programme – e.g. the laundry facilities, campus shops and communal spaces in the halls of residence.
- ▶ Make a point of looking at the accommodation that's on offer and the sport and recreational facilities.
- ▶ Ask about clubs and societies – do they suit the young person's interests?
- ▶ Avoid cutting a visit short – make sure that you see everything that you can fit in, it will be worth it.
- ▶ Encourage the young person to speak to students who are studying the course they are interested in – they can often give a different perspective from that of the academic staff and formal presentations.
- ▶ Visit the town and surrounding areas – don't be embarrassed to ask the students for suggestions of where to go and where students socialise. Does the social life appeal to them? Do they like the feel of the area? Is the university campus-based? Confined to one area or spread over town? How easy is it to get around? Is the campus a split-site?
- ▶ Make notes and take pictures on a mobile phone to help remember things more accurately later.
- ▶ If applicable, visit crèche facilities within the university and ask to meet students who are parents.
- ▶ Enquire about clubs and societies outside the student community. Joining such clubs may help when other students are away during vacation times.
- ▶ Help the young person be critical about what they have seen and heard.
- ▶ Make contact with the student support service and meet the designated person for care leavers.



For more information visit
the following website:

www.opendays.com

Chapter Eight

The UCAS application process

8

The UCAS application process

“Ok, I’ll just get a student loan. Surely it won’t be that difficult?”

Wrong again! I missed out on my place at university because my social worker was disorganised.

She had lost the forms she needed to sign and failed to tell me this until I called to ask when it would be a good day for me to pick the forms up and hand deliver them to the university. I had one week left so I thought that if I picked up new forms she would be able to sign them on the day and then I would be able to hand them in. It didn’t happen. My social worker went on annual leave.

The Fostering Network (2010)

After all this groundwork, it is now time to begin the university application process. The application process has numerous stages and it can seem daunting and complex at first glance. As a foster carer, you can help by familiarising yourself with the application process at the very beginning of the young person’s search, including checking deadlines and any individual requirements of the universities they may choose.



Diary markers for the UCAS application process

The following calendar will give you an idea of a student's research, application and enrolment timetable which starts at the beginning of Year 12.

February to June (Year 12)

Students research university choices, attend Open Days and Higher Education Fairs. Schools/colleges receive student information from UCAS.

September 1st

UCAS open to receive applications for the following year's course entries.

October 15th

YEAR 13 - Closing date for applications to Oxford or Cambridge, and for all medicine, dentistry and veterinary medicine or veterinary science courses.

January 15th

Closing date for main applications to all other university courses. Some schools expect applications to be completed before the end of the autumn term.

Mid March

The late application system - UCAS Extra starts.

June 30th

Last date UCAS can receive 'late' application forms.

July/August

A-level and equivalent exam results are published. Students who have met the conditions of their offer will have a place and will automatically receive information from the university. Students who do not get the results for either their first or second choice university will automatically enter Clearing.

Late September

University courses begin and students will have been given dates for arriving at the university.

The NINE steps to making a UCAS application

1 Timing

Applications open in September for courses to start the following year. The application deadline for the majority of courses is 15 January. Some Art Foundation Courses will allow applications up until March. All applications go through UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service), a central body that processes millions of applications each year for full-time undergraduate courses.

It is worth noting that medicine, dentistry, veterinary sciences and Oxbridge (Oxford or Cambridge University) all apply through UCAS. Oxbridge may ask for a secondary application to be made direct to the college. The medicine, dentistry and the veterinary sciences often require additional exams to be sat. These disciplines have an application deadline of 15 October.

Most young people will work on their UCAS application form at school or college towards the end of Year 12 and the start of Year 13. The process is wholly managed online and one form covers applications to several universities, and up to five course choices. UCAS distribute the completed application forms and manage the offer of places. There are different deadlines for different courses, but generally it is 15 January for the following autumn although it's always advisable to apply as early as possible. Always check the UCAS website for the exact date, visit www.ucas.ac.uk

If an application is late, it may still be considered at the universities discretion and subject to demand but this should not be relied upon.

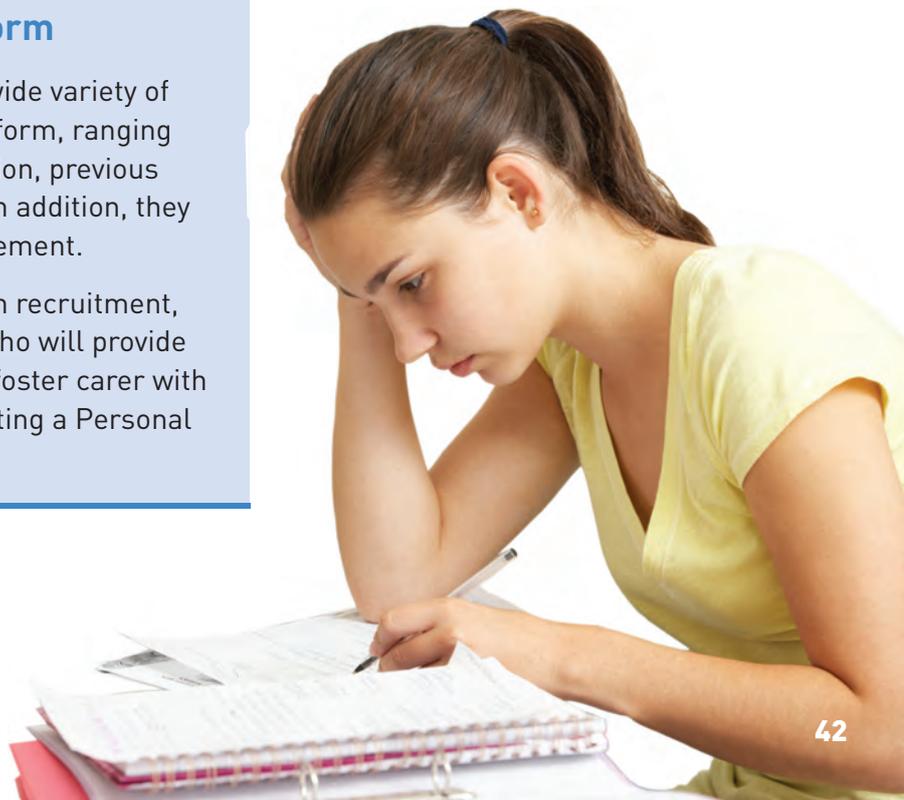
The 'UCAS points' system

Each university will have a different entry requirement, and it will often differ for each course. There are separate rules that apply to mature (21+) students. The number of UCAS Tariff Points is set out for each qualification. For example, an A grade at A-level is worth 120 points; a B grade is worth 100 points. Many different qualifications have points associated with them and the UCAS website has a table showing these points.

2 Completing the application form

The young person will have to give a wide variety of factual information in the application form, ranging from details such as contact information, previous schools and predicted exam grades. In addition, they will need to complete a Personal Statement.

Most universities will have a contact in recruitment, widening access or student support who will provide advice to the young person in care or foster carer with regards to filling out the form and writing a Personal Statement.



3 The Personal Statement

One of the key parts of the application form is the Personal Statement, where young people can 'sell themselves' and demonstrate their abilities. This section highlights their achievements, hopes, attributes and work experience along with reasons for choosing the course, a reference from a person in authority at their current school or an employer if they are working, and anything else to make their application stand out against others. They might be worried about this section as it is seen as the most challenging part of the application. They will need your help in completing it and it can take multiple drafts to get it right.

Competition for university places is strong, especially for the most popular and the most sought after courses. The Personal Statement is the young person's opportunity to represent themselves in the best light to the admissions team at their chosen university. Many universities do not undertake interviews, so the Personal Statement is vital to make the young person stand out amongst all the applicants. The person reading the statement wants to establish if this is the right course for the young person - Have they researched the course? Are they aware what is involved? Do they have the dedication, personality and ability to complete it?

What needs to be included in the Personal Statement?

The young person will need to have a clear idea of why they want to study the course at this particular university. The admissions team do not wish to read vague generalisations.

The following points should be considered, (the UCAS website contains more advice):

- ▶ Why does the course interest them?
- ▶ What future career are they planning and why?
- ▶ Work experience is important, it does not need to be course-related. Any part-time employment, charity or volunteer work will demonstrate a strong work ethic. Membership of participative groups and consultations should also be included.
- ▶ What do they like to do in their spare time?
(For example: Are they in a sports team?
Do they have musical talents?)
- ▶ If the young person is taking, or has taken a gap year, they will need to give a full explanation of their plans and how this will benefit them when they take up their place. (see page 14)

Personal Statements

We advise that they only focus on what's relevant to the course. If they've had disruption to learning but have gained relevant experience then include it. The statement should always be positive and avoid drawing the admission tutor's attention to negative aspects.

If there are special circumstances where education has been disrupted and they feel this needs to be explained, we would advise they do not include it in their personal statement, but contact the admissions tutor directly to explain the situation.

Scott Mckenzie,
Widening Access Officer,
Cardiff University

There are lots of do's and don'ts with regard to completing this section. These include the use of correct grammar and spelling, avoiding humour, not exaggerating and avoiding plagiarism of another Personal Statement. The statement is not about a young person making a list of their achievements, but rather applying their experiences to demonstrate their learning and development. It should be a reflection on their experiences to show a better understanding of one's self and one's own abilities. It is worth looking online at examples of Personal Statements, but note that admissions tutors are well versed in spotting plagiarism.

The Who Cares Trust has produced a CD-ROM *World of Work* that has a range of activities to help young people identify their skills and qualities.

Visit <http://www.thewhocarestrust.org.uk/>



The importance of ticking the care leavers box on the UCAS application form

It is vital that care leavers tick the box on the online UCAS application form declaring that they are a care leaver. This is strictly confidential and is the trigger at the university to offer extra help and support, including financial. This information will not be circulated to other staff, departments, tutors, etc unless the young person gives their permission.

4 The decision-making process

After submitting the application form, the applicant may be invited to interview - some colleges and universities interview everyone as a matter of course, others do not. In the spring term, each university will offer the young person either a conditional or unconditional place based on factors such as whether they will gain (or indeed have) the grades required. If they don't meet the criteria, they will receive a rejection.

It is important that you let UCAS know if the young person changes address, telephone number or email address during this time.

Conditional offers

A conditional offer is made when exam results are not yet known. A university will make an offer that is conditional on achieving specific grades, e.g. 2 B's and a C or 180 points or satisfactorily completing a course. Sometimes they will specify what the points must include.

An unconditional offer does not have any such conditions and is usually made if exam results are already known or if the applicant is a mature student.

5 Once offers are received

Once all the universities have replied and if offers are unconditional, the young person will be able to simply choose their preferred course. If places are conditional upon exam grades, a first (firm) and second (insurance) should be selected. The firm offer should be the preferred place the young person would like to attend. They can also make an insurance choice, which is usually an offer with lower grades than the firm choice. This is to ensure the young person can still take up a place should they not meet the entry requirements for their first option.

6 Achieving higher than expected exam results

An adjustment period has recently been introduced for students who achieved higher than expected exam grades, to enable them to submit a new application without the risk of losing their original firm offer. So, if the young person did not aim as high as they could when making their choices, they may still be in with a chance to better their offer. The criteria for this is quite exact, visit the UCAS website to see what constitutes exceeding an offer.

7 If an offer has not been made

By the end of March, if no offers have been received during the first round of UCAS, the young person should apply again through UCAS Extra for courses with available places. The final part of the process, if no place is offered by August, is to enter UCAS Clearing.

8 Clearing

This is the point when the universities and colleges know exactly how many places they have left after students with offers have accepted or rejected their place. Students who have previously not received offers or who did not achieve the expected grades can now apply directly to the universities for a place. After discussing options with the universities, the young person must finally accept a place through UCAS. Some may be happy to take their chances and choose to wait until after the July deadline for the first application for clearing. However, they must still register with UCAS and submit a personal statement and reference.

The latest date for applying through clearing is currently 20 September for the forthcoming academic year but you should always check with UCAS for the most current date.

9 Deferred entry

Deferred entry, or a 'gap year', is when a young person decides not to go on to Higher Education immediately after their final year at school. They may take a year off to work or travel. They can apply for deferred entry on the UCAS application form giving reasons for wanting to do so. Many admissions teams are happy for them to do this. See page 14 for more information.

Chapter Nine

Supporting young people starting university

9

Supporting young people starting university

Once the young person has accepted their place at university they will receive a welcome pack containing their enrolment details as well as a guide to accommodation. If they have decided to move away to university they will need to complete and return their housing application as soon as possible to avoid disappointment.

The wait is over, the accommodation is sorted, the bags are packed, make sure they have everything and give them a last hug, for a while at least. What happens now?

Student life can be hectic, especially in the first few weeks. During this time, staff and existing students will offer a warm welcome to new undergraduates. Students Services will be on hand to help in any way they can. The Students' Union play a big role in helping new students to settle in by organising events during Freshers Week.

Most students settle into university life very quickly, but common problems in the first few weeks can include homesickness, study concerns and worries about making friends. Your support can be invaluable during this time, even if you are just a phone call away. If their concerns continue and they feel they need extra support, encourage them to make use of the support services offered by the university.

Students who did not have supportive foster carers often felt very much alone during their early weeks. Some had difficulty processing the information provided and missed the chance to apply for grants for which they were eligible. Making friends at an early stage was extremely important and was easier for those with places in halls of residence. A number of students missed this opportunity due to delays in local authority decisions about funding.

Ajayi, Jackson and Quigley (2005)

Day-to-day life, even at university, rarely involves being assailed by free drink, condoms, tins of beans and invitations to attempt skydiving. Nor does it usually offer so many opportunities to ask for help and support or to meet new friends. ...if you've found the whole experience boring, noisy and miserable, don't give up and go home. Real university life hasn't started yet.'

Swain. (2008) How to survive the first week Available at www.guardian.co.uk/education/2008/aug/14/uni.first.week. (accessed 1 August 2012)

Freshers Week is the term that UK universities and colleges give to the period immediately before the beginning of a new academic year. Its purpose is to give new students a chance to meet their housemates, make new friends and sort out administrative tasks such as opening student bank accounts. Freshers week is usually based on a series of social events such as discos, live bands, parties and a Freshers Week Ball.

For many young people, Freshers Week will be their first experience of living on their own. The week allows students settle down and have a taste of independent life for a full week before they begin to devote serious attention to their studies. Some young students embrace the week with vigour but others might find it too intense with new friends asking questions such as: Where are you from? What A' levels did you get? What's your Mum and Dad's jobs? For some care leavers, these introductions can increase perceived feelings of being 'different'.

It's important to reassure young people that Freshers Week is not a true reflection of what independent living is all about and that students come from a wide range of backgrounds.

At the end of the day, as a foster carer you may be the only consistent adult in a young person's life throughout university that they can turn to. Social workers will come and go and it is often foster carers who get the emergency phone call when things are going wrong!

Being there for a young person for the long run should be seen as a privilege.

Gail Duffy, Foster Carer



Supporting a young person starting university

- a foster carer's guide

Getting ready

- ▶ Prepare them for independent living and help with the move to university. Independent living skills should be holistic and include self-care skills; practical skills such as cooking, cleaning and shopping and also personal skills such as managing both formal and informal relationships. Going to a new place can be very intimidating, but it will be less of an ordeal if the young person feels confident in their ability to cope with the day-to-day aspects of life.
- ▶ If the young person has chosen to live in self-catering accommodation, make sure they know how to cook a few simple recipes. There are plenty of books and websites available focusing on student cooking on a budget and confidence in the kitchen will rapidly ensure firm friendships.
- ▶ Check that their personal possessions are insured. If the young person is going to live in a hall of residence, check if the insurance is covered on their

rental fee and if so, that it covers items such as laptops or mobile phones.

- ▶ Check if a TV licence is required. If the young person has a TV, or accesses a TV through their laptop, they are required to have TV licence. Again, check if the licence fee is included in any rental agreement.

“If we can't be there for young people at one of the most vulnerable times of their lives then we are failing those we promised that we would make a difference to.”

Gail Duffy, Foster Carer



Moving in

- ▶ Accompany them on their first day, there's nothing worse than arriving alone in a taxi with a pile of bin bags. If you can't go with them, ensure that somebody helps the young person settle in on his or her first day. Liaise with named contact for care leavers from the student support team at the university. (See pages 23 and 24).

Student Finance

- ▶ Together, make a budget so that the young person will know how much he or she has to live on each month. Make sure he or she understands basic

activities like how to write a cheque or make online payments, keep records of deposits and withdrawals, check bank balances online and balance an end-of-month statement.

- ▶ Encourage the young person to open a bank account before they start at university. Ensure that the young person has money in their account at the start of term in case their first loan cheque or other payments are delayed for any reason. Be willing, if possible, to lend money in a crisis until the responsible local authority is able to approve and send money.
- ▶ Care leavers should be fully aware of their future entitlement to support whilst in university and who will provide it, even if they reject the support at that time. Make sure that any financial support that they will receive from their responsible local authority is confirmed in writing and that they have a copy of the document.
- ▶ Make sure they take plenty of passport-sized photographs with them – they will need them for all sorts of memberships cards, passes and forms during Freshers Week. Using passport photograph machines will prove expensive and you may just as easily be able to print them out at home.

“Care leavers often want nothing more than to leave the whole business of care behind them’. ...In trying to reach out, universities can often press on a sore spot, meaning well but not understanding well...it is a delicate task balancing support for a young person accessing higher education while recognising their desire to be the same.”

(Goddard 2010)



Making friends

- ▶ The first few days may seem overwhelming and lonely. Reassure them that they are not alone and that the other students will probably be feeling the same way - it's new for everyone. Encourage them to talk through problems with other students. One of the biggest problems is that unhappy students tend to internalise problems. They see everyone else looking happy and assume there is something wrong with them. Talking to others can help to put things in perspective.
- ▶ Most universities have a full list of their societies on their student union's website. Encourage the young person to go to the Freshers Fair where they can sign up to clubs and societies.

Health and Emotional well-being

- ▶ Let them know all universities have student support services who will help any student regardless of whether they are a care leaver or not.
- ▶ Listen. Encourage them to talk about how they feel about moving on, starting afresh and aspects of university life.
- ▶ Encourage them to register with a GP and dentist.

Keeping in touch

- ▶ Make sure you find the time to regularly communicate with them to see how they are getting on, and remind them regularly how much they have achieved to get to university and celebrate their achievements with them, however big or small. Show them how proud you are of them!



For information about studying, student life and finance visit

www.uni4me.com

Chapter Ten

Inspiring and supporting young people in care to go to university

Inspiring and supporting young people in care to go to university



The Ten Essentials

- 1.** Advocate, encourage and support the educational development of looked after children and young people. Have aspirations for them from a very young age.

- 2.** For children and young people in care, forward planning is extremely important. If a fostered young person is thinking about going to college (Further Education) or university (Higher Education) make sure that this is noted in their Pathway Plan. This is essential to ensure that they get the appropriate funding and support.

- 3.** Help them plan for the university and the course which best suits them.
 - 👉 Involve yourself with planning and preparation.
 - 👉 Attend open days with them.
 - 👉 Gather information about the support and support packages available.
 - 👉 Encourage contact with the designated care leaver contact at each university.

- 4.** Get to know the University application system. Familiarise yourself with the deadlines for the UCAS application and open day dates, for example. List key dates so you know what needs to be done each school term and that the young person does not miss any deadlines thus closing any options available to them.

- 5.** Listen. Encourage them to talk about how they feel about moving on, starting afresh and aspects of university life.

- 6.** Encourage and support them to develop friendships.

- 7.** Prepare them for independent living and help with the move to university. Independent living skills should be holistic and include self-care skills; practical skills (such as cooking, cleaning and shopping) and also personal skills (such as managing both formal and informal relationships).

- 8.** On the first day of university, ensure that you accompany them and if you can't, make sure somebody helps the young person settle in on their first day. Make sure they don't have to feel independent all at once.

- 9.** Make sure that any financial support that they will receive from their local authority is confirmed in writing and that they have a copy of the document when they start university.

- 10.** Keep in touch. Make sure you find the time to regularly communicate with them to see how they are getting on, and remind them regularly how much they have achieved to get there. Make sure that you attend their graduation ceremony. Show them how proud you are of them.



Chapter Eleven

Conclusion

11

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is clear that being in care should not be an insurmountable barrier for young people moving on to Higher Education. It isn't the case that care leavers aren't capable of getting into Further and Higher Education. Rather, that more needs to be done to encourage them to apply and help them to stay the course.

For many young people in care, it takes just one person to believe in them. To support and advocate for times when they feel nobody cares. It doesn't take much for a looked after child or care leaver to believe they are destined to fail because most people that they come across will expect them to. However, for some young people in care, all it takes is for one person to spend the time, believe and encourage them to succeed and achieve in life. This is one of the most important roles of a foster carer.

Care leavers who go to university should be assured of someone who will keep in contact with them, who will check how they are doing, provide support when needed and above all - celebrate their successes along the way. This is where the role of the foster carer in terms of ongoing support is invaluable to care leavers.

Care leavers can go to university and they most definitely can succeed.

Chapter Twelve

Supporting Resources

12

Supporting Resources

Fosterline WALES
Llinell Maethu CYMRU

0800 316 7664

Monday-Friday 9.30am to 12.30pm
In addition, an answer phone message can be left 24 hours a day, using the same free phone number **0800 316 7664**, and a Fosterline WALES worker will either ring back on the same day, or the next working day.

Fosterline Wales

Fosterline Wales is an independent confidential freephone advice line for all those involved in foster care in Wales.

0800 316 7664 Monday - Friday 9:30am to 12:30pm

The Fostering Network Publications shop

The Fostering Network offers a range of products and services to help foster carers and professionals support children and young people in care.

For more information visit our online shop:

www.fosteringresources.co.uk



Thrive Special Edition: Going to University The Fostering Network Wales magazine for young people in care

Free to members, *Thrive* gives information and advice for young people aged 14-16 years old that want to go to university. Using your member login details, download your copy from <http://www.fostering.net/all-about-fostering/resources/newsletters/thrive-newsletter-young-people>



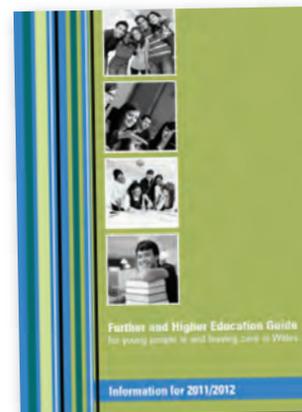
The Fostering Network Wales Online Education Toolkit

Free to members, our education toolkit aims to improve the educational experiences of looked after children by making information and support around all stages of their education more accessible to foster carers and fostering services. Using your exclusive life member login details, visit www.fostering.net/wales to download your free copy.



Further and Higher Education Guide for young people in and leaving care in Wales

This comprehensive guide can be downloaded free from www.swansea.ac.uk/undergraduate/student-services/care-leavers/ The guide provides practical information and guidance including information with regards to qualifications, choosing the right course, the application process as well as financial, emotional and general support. Information for 2011/2012.



My Planner

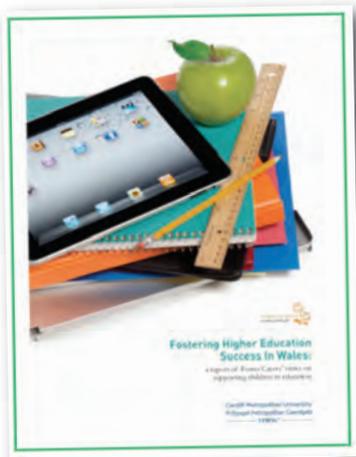
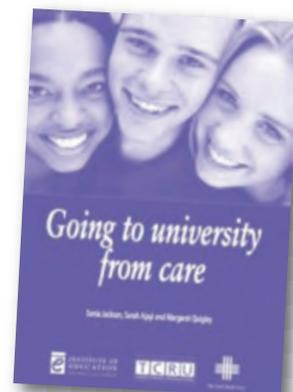
My Planner published by the Children's Commissioner for Wales is designed to give young people in care help and advice at a time when young people are starting to think about leaving care, it includes advice about Higher Education.

Download your free copy from <http://www.childcom.org.uk/en/my-planner/>

By Degrees: From Care to University

This study described the experiences of a group of young people about whom previously nothing was known – the tiny minority of students in Higher Education who come from the care system. It provided clear evidence that their ability and potential were being systematically underestimated and that they were being deprived of most educational opportunities open to other young people. The study triggered the introduction of a £2,000 bursary for care leavers who go on to higher education. It encouraged many UK universities and local authorities to improve the support they offer care leavers before and after they enter Higher Education. The research has also influenced policy thinking in other countries. Visit

www.buttuk.org/resources.php/530/by-degrees-going-to-university-from-care-full-report



Fostering Higher Education success in Wales: a report of Foster Carer's views on supporting children in education

This report published by the Fostering Network Wales and Cardiff Metropolitan University demonstrates that foster carers want to and should be more involved in supporting the children they look after to succeed in education.

Visit <http://www.fostering.net/all-about-fostering/all-resources>

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The Fostering Network is the UK's leading charity for all those involved in foster care. As the UK's voice of foster care, we are committed to raising the standards of care for children and young people who are fostered throughout the UK. We work with our members to share knowledge and best practice, promote fostering and campaign for positive changes in foster care.

www.fostering.net

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rhwydwaith maethu
llais gofal maeth
the fostering network
the voice of foster care

