

### Three in five with experience of being in care given no guidance when applying to higher education

Students who have spent time in care have high hopes about going to university or college, yet 60% receive no specific support relevant to their circumstances when deciding on their options, according to a new report from UCAS.

This latest [‘Next steps’](#) report, published in partnership with Unite Foundation, explores the experiences and aspirations of care-experienced students in their progression to higher education (HE), based on UCAS data and survey responses. UCAS uses the broader term ‘care experience’ to encompass the range of care settings an applicant may have encountered\*.

The report found care-experienced applicants have positive expectations of going to university or college, expressing excitement about meeting new people (68%), becoming more independent (66%) and making a fresh start (64%). Yet three in five (60%) received no specific guidance at school or college about applying to HE from a care background – despite the fact mechanisms such as financial bursaries, year-round accommodation, and mental health and disability support could make a difference to their decision.

This highlights the challenges care-experienced students may face in trying to find the right information when applying to HE or apprenticeships. This could be due to a number of reasons, such as their support network not all having access to the latest or specialist knowledge and resources about UCAS applications, or the specific support available in HE for care-experienced students. It also underlines the importance of teachers, personal advisers and others in connecting prospective students with the right information.

This is significant given the number of UK applicants sharing a care background has almost doubled since the question was first introduced, from 4,495 in 2008 to 8,930 in 2022 – now accounting for 1.6% of all UK applicants.

Other main findings from today’s report include:

- Experience of being in care intersects with other personal characteristics which can create additional or hidden barriers – compared to applicants without a care background, they are almost twice as likely to share a disability, nearly three times more likely to share a mental health condition, and nearly 79% more likely to identify as LGBT+.
- They are significantly more likely to be mature applicants, showing their progression to higher education is often longer – being 69% more likely to apply aged 21 or over.
- Their experience of support in school or college was mixed – they felt most supported pastorally (41%), but least supported with social and extra-curricular activities (32%).

- Their decisions about which university or college to go to are strongly influenced by their individual support needs – favouring institutions that offer mental health and wellbeing support (76%), financial support (64%), and guaranteed accommodation (63%).
- The report highlights that 45% of care-experienced students felt unsupported when exploring apprenticeship options. Previous UCAS research has identified that one in three students do not receive information about apprenticeships.
- Accommodation is a key factor for care experienced applicants when deciding where to study – with value for money (77%) and overall cost (76%) the most important considerations when choosing where to live.

As a result of these findings, UCAS has made several recommendations aimed at improving the journey to higher education for students from a care background. These include personalised information, advice and guidance, better quality data collection and sharing, and support for [Universities UK's recommendations](#) that universities and colleges should consider implementing minimum entry requirements for care-experienced applicants across the UK.

**UCAS Chief Executive Clare Marchant said:** “With growing numbers of applicants sharing experience of being in care, and welcome efforts from the HE sector and partners to increase access and participation for this group, there are plenty of positives to take from our findings.

“Navigating your options when applying for a traditional undergraduate degree or apprenticeships can be daunting for any student but particularly for those who may not have family to turn to for advice. Our report highlights that while care-experienced students have high expectations and motivations for higher education, a large proportion have little awareness of the support mechanisms in place that can help their progression, lacking crucial information, advice and guidance to support their decision-making.

“UCAS is committed to ensuring all students, regardless of their background, are able to access the full range of post-secondary opportunities, including apprenticeships, and we have made important strides through our Fair Access Programme. For example, we have introduced seven new widening participation questions to the application for 2023 entry onwards to allow students to flag their individual circumstances. However, it is evident there is more we can do collectively to raise awareness of available support, enhance verified data, and make pathways more visible to ensure these students’ needs and aspirations are met.”

**Fiona Ellison, Director of Unite Foundation, said:** “At the Unite Foundation, we have been working with care experienced students for over 10 years. We know from the students we work with that there are many barriers care experienced students face both getting to and completing university.

“With three in five care-experienced students receiving no information about higher education options, we echo UCAS’ call to make pathways and support more visible to these young people. We also welcome the call to gather and share data in this area, as this will help us to further understand and ultimately improve the university experience for those

leaving care.

“Bespoke support for care-experienced students has the power to transform their time at university. We hope this report will encourage colleagues across the sector to review the support they provide and explore what more they could be doing to ensure care leavers are able to benefit equitably from everything university has to offer.”

The report has been welcomed by the John Lewis Partnership, parent company to John Lewis and Waitrose, which has a long-term commitment to support young people leaving care into employment – highlighted in its much-heralded Christmas advert and charity fundraising campaign.

**Ceira Thom, Head of Learning, John Lewis Partnership, said:** "Care-experienced young people have huge talent and potential but too often don't have the right support or financial safety net at this crucial time in their lives.

"At the John Lewis Partnership we're committed to providing employment, apprenticeship opportunities and scholarships for care leavers to realise their potential. But we can't do this alone and it's great to see UCAS and the Unite Foundation raising awareness of this important issue.

"Employers, schools, universities and the government all need to work together so that every young person has the support they deserve to thrive in work, education and life, so that they can build a happier future."

## **ENDS**

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### **Notes for Editors**

The [report](#) is based on analysis of almost 9,000 care-experienced individuals who applied to HE in 2022, and a survey of 500 applicants who shared a care background ahead of starting their studies in Autumn 2022.

\*UCAS uses the broader term ‘care experience’ to encompass the range of care settings an applicant may have encountered, such as living with foster carers, living in a residential children's home, being looked after at home under a supervision order, or living with friends or relatives in kinship care.

## **UCAS**

UCAS, the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, is an independent charity, and the UK's shared admissions service for higher education.

Our services support young people making post-18 choices, as well as mature learners, by providing information, advice, and guidance to inspire and facilitate educational progression

to university, college, or a degree apprenticeship.

We manage almost three million applications, from around 700,000 people each year, for full-time undergraduate courses at over 380 universities and colleges across the UK.

We also provide a wide range of research, consultancy and advisory services to schools, colleges, careers services, professional bodies, and employers, including apprenticeships.

We're a successful and fast-growing organisation, which helps hundreds of thousands of people every year. We're committed to delivering a first-class service to all our customers — they're at the heart of everything we do.

### **Unite Foundation**

The Unite Foundation is an independent registered charity offering unique accommodation scholarships for care leavers and estranged young people at universities across the UK.

The Unite Foundation scholarship takes care of students' accommodation and bills, covering up to three full years of study for 365 days a year. Our aim is that with a stable home taken care of, Unite Foundation students feel able to access and experience everything that university has to offer.

The charity currently works with 25 universities across England and Scotland, and the team works closely with Unite Students: the charity's accommodation partner and principal corporate donor.

Founded in 2012, the Unite Foundation is currently celebrating its 10th Anniversary. To date, the Unite Foundation has awarded 614 scholarships, with 285 graduates now pursuing their dreams.

For more information about the Unite Foundation and the scholarship visit <https://thisisusatuni.org/unite-foundation>.

The Unite Foundation is a charitable incorporated organisation registered in England and Wales with registered charity number 1198601 and a charity registered in Scotland with registered charity number SC051987.