

Supporting care-experienced students into and through higher education

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A little bit about me

Research Fellow at the Department of Education, University of York.

Positive Impact (2018-2020)

Explored experiences of care-experienced and estranged students in university, focusing on access, retention and outcomes.

Care-Experienced Graduates (2021-2024)

Exploring transitions out of university and into employment/further study for care-experienced graduates.

Also an Independent Visitor for my local council.



The Care-Experienced Graduates' Decision-Making, Choices and Destinations Project

PHASE ONE REPORT



Introduction

- Access to information
- Supporting open day participation
- Named contacts
- UCAS: 'Ticking the box'
- Support while at university.

Access to information about higher education [1]

Financial support

- What can they expect from LA? E.g. holiday bursaries, HE bursary?
- What may they be able to get from their HE institution?
- Who can be contacted in case of a financial emergency?



Access to information about higher education [2]

Access to accommodation

- Is social housing needed?
- What can the HE institution offer (365 accommodation, free/discounted accommodation)?
- Private accommodation: Plan who can act as a guarantor.



Ensuring information is comprehensive and in one place is key

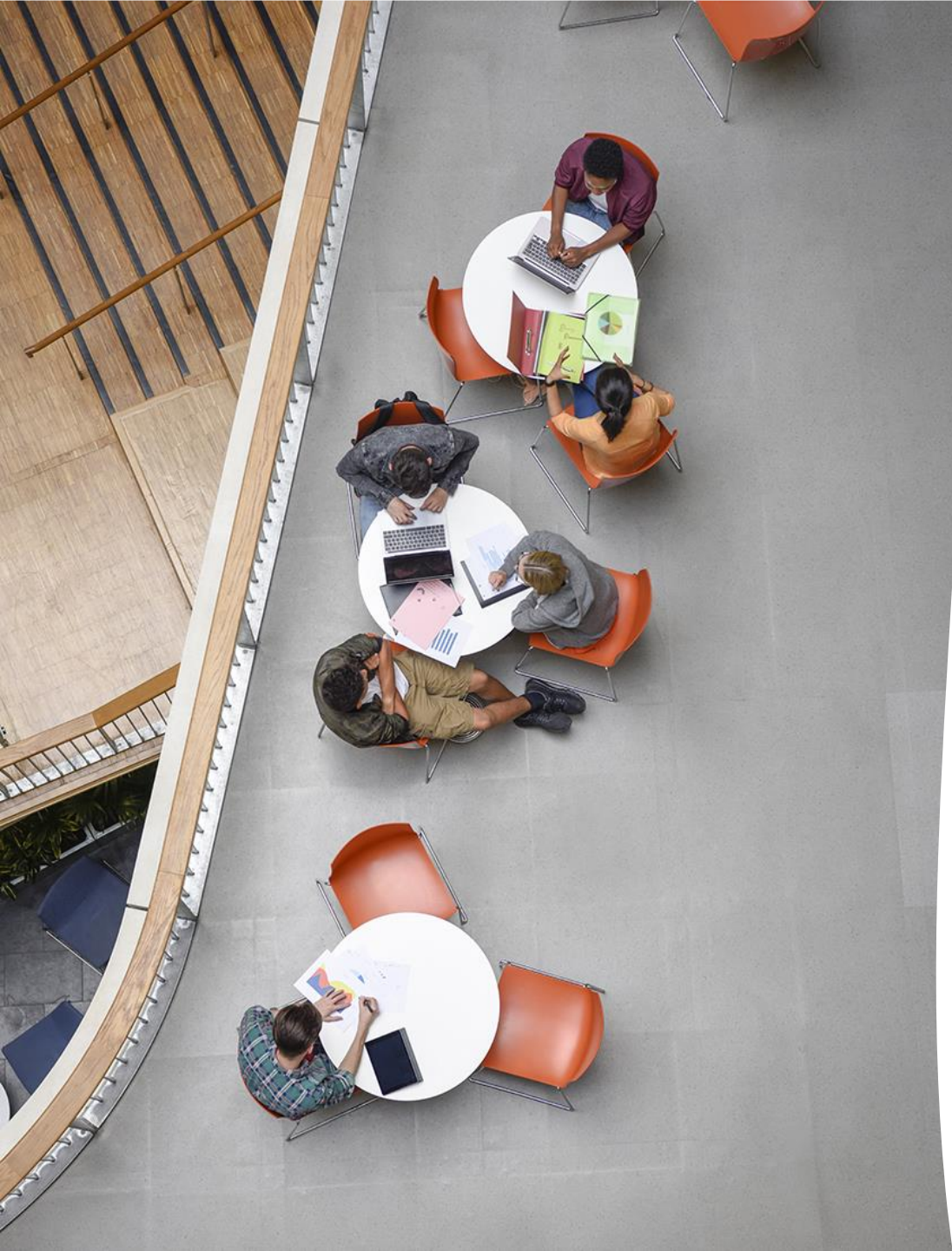
‘Many of the students interviewed had not known about the support that might be available until they were on course suggesting that more still needs to be done to raise awareness’ (Stevenson et al. 2020: 12)



Raising awareness

- Provide a comprehensive overview of what support is available from the university and LA *before* starting.
- Information should all be included in one place.
- Regular reminders of this while on the course.
 - Information overload can occur before starting!
- Knowing what is available in advance can prevent 'crisis points'.





Facilitating open day participation

Institutional visits play a critical role in higher education decision-making (Diamond et al., 2012; HEFCE, 2010).

- Demystifies what university is (what it looks and feels like!)
- Helps attendees to understand if they can ‘see themselves’ there – this feeling of ‘fit’ is important.
- Helpful and less intimidating if carers, PAs or social worker can attend too.

Open days: Check what the university offers

- Some can organise a 'named contact' to attend with them.
- Some offer 'VIP' visits.

Details should be available on the [Propel website](https://propel.org.uk) (propel.org.uk) and/or the specific university's webpages.



What/who is a 'named contact'?

A staff member who acts as a single point of contact allocated to care-experienced and estranged students within the university.

Contact details for named contacts across universities in the UK are available on the [Propel website](https://propel.org.uk) (propel.org.uk)





What do named contacts provide?

- Single point of contact.
- Pre-entry information and support.
- Information on what support the university and (sometimes) what the local authority can provide.
- Help with completing forms/applications to access support.
- Signposting to university support and services.
- Checking in with students to see how they are.



‘Building a relationship is absolutely key’

I had an email from (the named contact) almost immediately after I had applied, being like ‘Hello, you’ve ticked the care leaver box, this is who I am and this is where you can find me if you come to the university’. So that was absolutely fantastic. (Male, 22)

Building a relationship is absolutely key, particularly for care experienced people who will have had multiple people in their lives let them down...to have that dedicated contact based on our relationship is key. (Male, 21)



UCAS: Ticking the box

Primary way for universities to identify who needs a named contact, and who is eligible for other forms of support (accommodation support, financial support etc.)

Not every CE person will tick the box:

- Concerns about stigma.
- Uncertainty as to why it is asked.
- Experiences of institutions and professionals knowing about your life and background.

Providing clarity

‘It's definitely a matter of awareness...if you make it clear to people when you're applying through UCAS, look if you have experienced any of these different things... we can access all these benefits’
(Male, 21)



Retention: The importance of support

What hinders retention?

- Financial difficulties
- Mental health issues
- Isolation
- Academic challenges

What helps retention?

- Financial support (proactive)
- Emotional support & expressions of care
- Personal support – friendships, student support services

'Independent student' social groups

Some universities have created groups for care-experienced and estranged students:

- Christmas meal together.
- Social events during half terms.

Can help to promote:

- A sense of belonging.
- Connections with others who have a tacit understanding of circumstances.



Small expressions of care

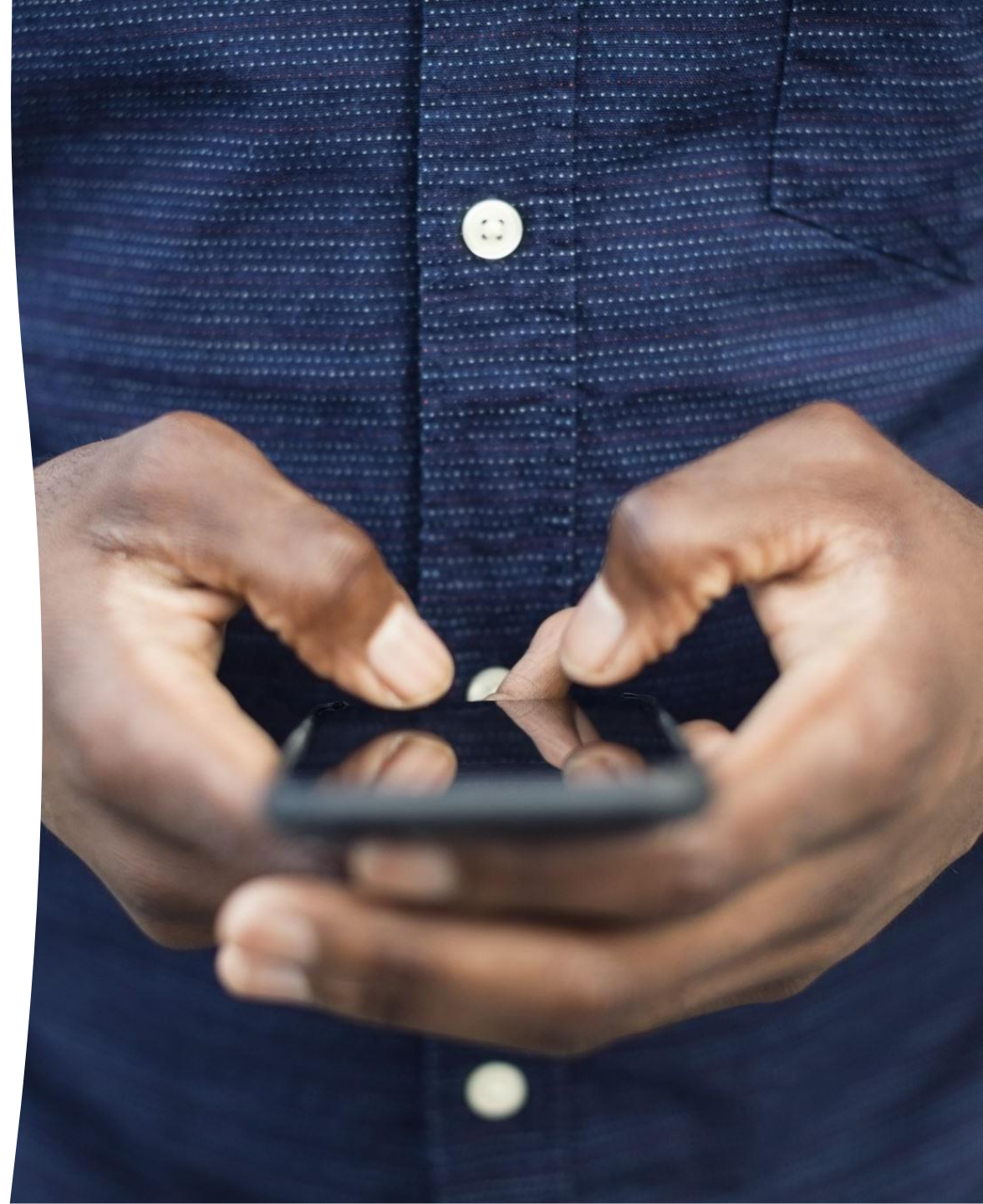
Some universities provide:

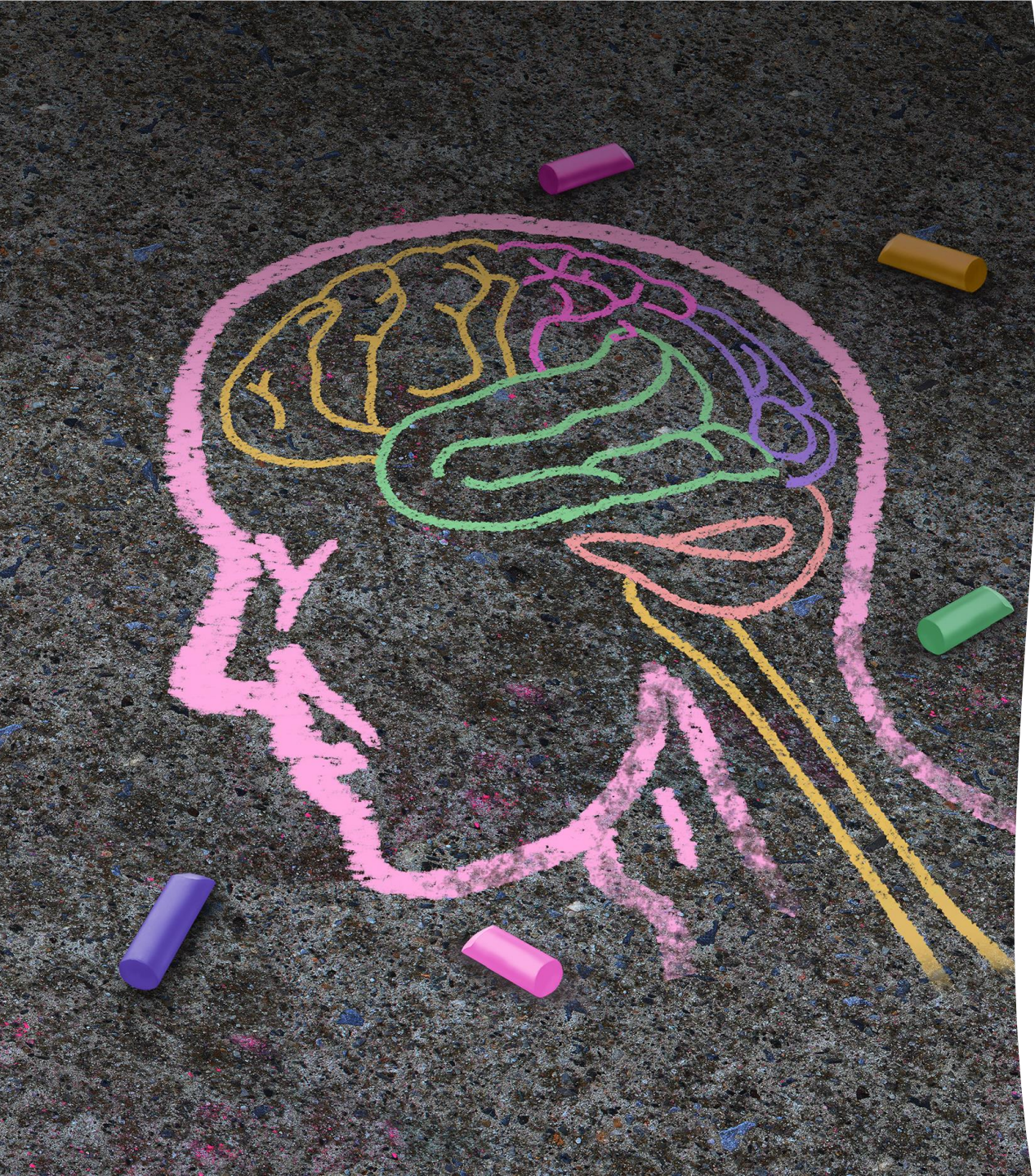
- 'Moving in' package.
- Birthday card/birthday text.
- Christmas card/gift.
- Simply 'checking in' – 'How are things going?' 'Do you want to go for a coffee?'



Emotional support

Emotional support from carers, professionals, and the university results in more successful transitions (Jackson and Ajayi, 2007; Stevenson et al., 2020).





Mental Health support

- Universities offer counselling and well-being services.
- Yet, these are often not set up to support long-term or complex mental health conditions.
- Many can signpost to external support for more complex needs.
- It is important to be aware that new mental health concerns can emerge at university (due to change, stress, and making sense of care history).



Academic support at university

- Most universities have ‘academic skills’, ‘learning development’ teams.
- They support students in developing the skills needed to achieve highly on their coursework (academic writing, critical thinking, revision techniques etc.)
- Workshops, one-to-one tutoring and online resources.



It's for everyone!

- University brings a whole new set of academic expectations and language that has not been encountered in compulsory education.
- *Not* remedial - anyone can access.
- Making prospective students aware of these services in advance can be helpful; it can help prevent becoming overwhelmed with new academic demands.



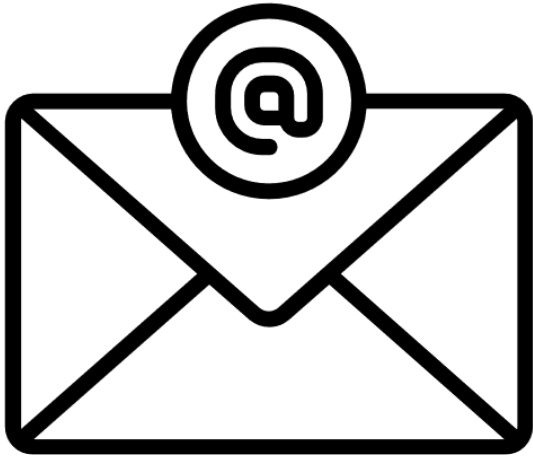
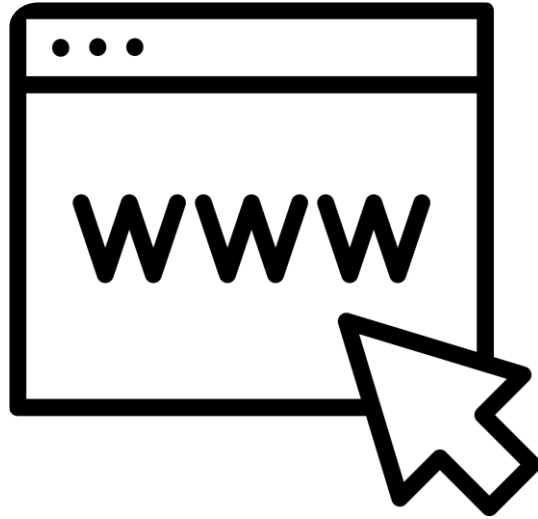
Key take-away points [1]

- Comprehensive information about what support is on offer in advance helps to prevent crisis points from being reached.
- What support will continue from the LA? What action needs to be taken for new provision (e.g. MH support, accommodation).
- It is important to clearly explain why care-experience status is being asked about (e.g. on UCAS applications).
- The Propel website lists what support each university provides for care-experienced students, and includes details of named contacts.



Key take-away points [2]

- Advise prospective students that they will have a named contact (and the importance of ticking the UCAS box to receive this).
- Checking in and being receptive to calls, emails and messages while students are at university is important in providing emotional support.
- Making prospective students aware that there are services within universities which provide academic support (and that it is completely acceptable to use them!)



Thank you

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