

Press release: Universities asked to do more to support care leavers

Universities across the country are being called on to do more for young people leaving care by giving them personal support, helping them pay for accommodation and providing money to buy books and join social clubs.

Currently just 6 per cent of care leavers aged 19-21 go into higher education, and those that do are nearly twice as likely to drop out than their peers. This is why Universities Minister Chris Skidmore and Children and Families Minister Nadhim Zahawi are calling for a shift in culture at universities to welcome care leavers and provide wraparound support to help them thrive.

The new Higher Education Principles published today (14 March) set out how universities – especially the most selective and best-resourced – should do more for young people leaving care by providing them with personal support through buddy systems as well as giving them money for course materials and to fully experience student life.

Children and Families Minister Nadhim Zahawi said:

Far too many young people leaving care are missing out on opportunities that their peers take for granted. Many universities are already improving their offers to care leavers, through our Care Leaver Covenant and beyond, but I want this to become the norm – not the exception.

These principles are important in creating a culture shift for all universities. They set out clearly what we expect from them in helping young people leaving care to start higher education, and call on them to extend the kinds of practical and personal support that will make a challenging transition less overwhelming.

Under the principles, the most selective universities are being asked to go further and set a high bar for the sector, providing free accommodation and bursaries to cover study and student experience costs, such as laptops and books as well as access to social groups.

Admissions teams should provide outreach to councils and schools to encourage looked after children to apply for higher education. Support could also include subsidised and year-round accommodation, as those leaving care to start university may not have the same family networks or a place to stay during the holidays. The new guidance sets an expectation on the level of support universities should offer to care leavers, putting them on track to succeed as soon as they arrive.

Universities Minister Chris Skidmore said:

Everyone, including young people leaving care, should have the opportunity and the support to thrive in university and go on to succeed. Care leavers taking up a place at university face different pressures to their peers, but we are determined to stop them from dropping out due to challenges beyond their control.

The access and participation work done by universities must ensure all parts of society have fair access, especially for care leavers. But a place at university is only the start and universities must also focus on supporting young people to make the most out of their course and ultimately secure employment in the future.

This builds on the launch of the Care Leaver Covenant, which sets out pledges made by the Government, businesses, charities, and voluntary sector groups to provide work and education-based opportunities to young people leaving the care system. So far 73 organisations have signed up to the Covenant, including 13 universities.

Poet and care leaver Lemn Sissay, who is also Chancellor of the University of Manchester and a champion of the Care Leaver Covenant, said:

Leaving care without qualifications or direction is seriously hard. I know. I was that person. It's critical that we come together to make sure that all young people, including those who have left the care system, have every opportunity, which is why these principles are so important, so vital.

It's truly great to see the Department for Education working so closely with universities in the interests of vulnerable young people leaving care. For me it is a historic moment. It's never happened before. One day I hope all universities will be able to say we are signed to The Care Leaver Covenant.

By encouraging universities to think more about the offer they make to care leavers, the guidance aims to reduce the number who are deemed as 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET) – almost 40 per cent of care leavers aged 19 to 21, compared to 13 per cent for this age group overall.

The new guidance builds on wider government support available to care leavers. The Department for Education has already extended the offer of support from a Personal Adviser to all leavers to the age of 25, while all care leavers who go to university are entitled to a £2,000 bursary from their local council, £1,200 from the college if they go into further education and £1,000 for the first year of an apprenticeship.

The principles also come after the Office for Students (OfS) published new guidance, under which universities that charge higher fees must have access and participation plans for implementation in 2020/21. The OfS will scrutinise these plans and hold universities to account on how they are improving outcomes for underrepresented students, including care leavers.

Anne Longfield, Children's Commissioner for England, said:

I want to see more young people in care going to University and the Department for Education is right to promote ways that universities can support those in care to apply for degrees and to flourish while they are studying. I am calling for universities to compete to offer the best support to children in care as we should all have the highest aspirations for these young people.

I was pleased to provide our input into the development of the Department for Education Principles based on the issues about which care leavers are increasingly calling my office for advice.

Alistair Jarvis, Chief Executive of Universities UK, said:

Universities are committed to working closely with schools and local authorities to increase the number of care leavers attending university and provide them with appropriate support to thrive at university.

These principles will help universities to build on existing work to provide personal support for care leavers to realise their full potential.