

# CARE-EXPERIENCED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: WHAT WE KNOW... AND WHAT WE DON'T

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# QUICK BACKGROUND TO CARE

- Around 2% of children will be ‘in care’ at some point in their lives
- Usually due to neglect, maltreatment or other trauma in the birth family
- About 75,000 children in care in England at any given time – managed by local authorities
- Includes foster care, kinship care and residential care – from one day to 18 years



# WHY DOES CARE MATTER...?

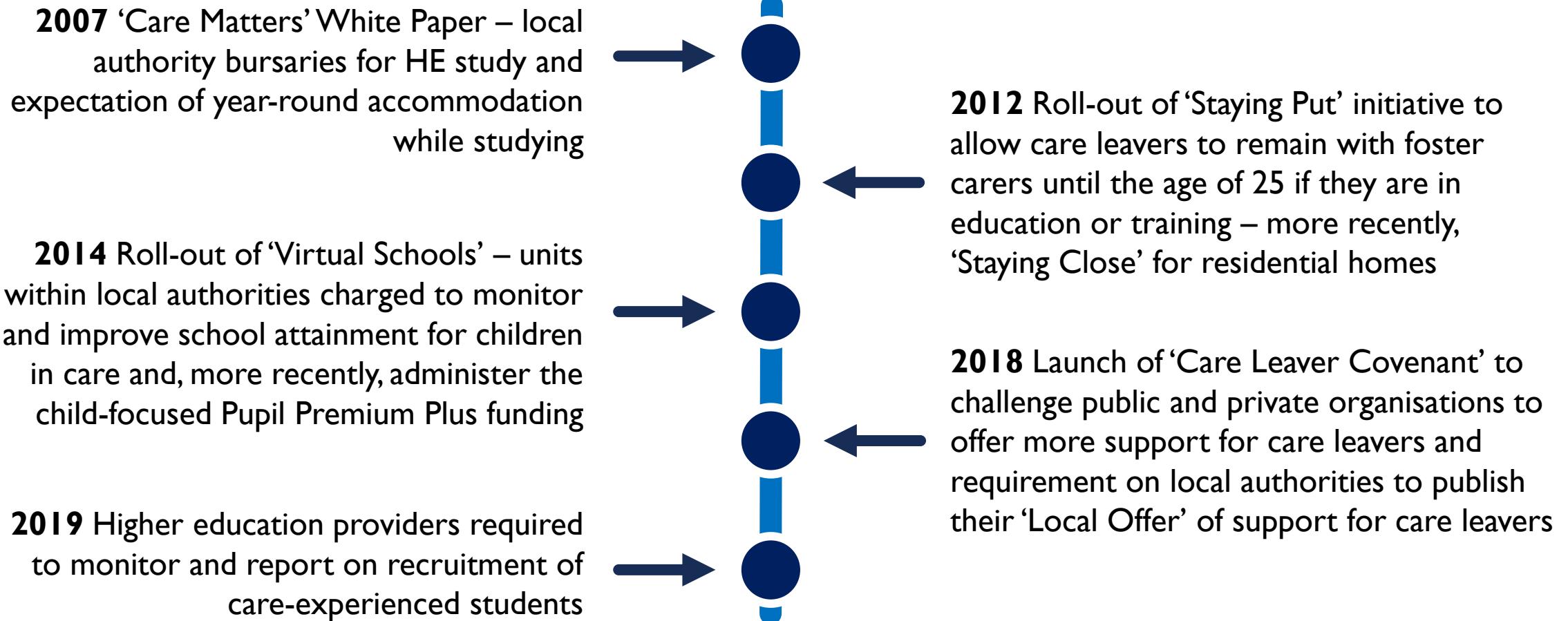


- Care-experienced people have among the least positive life outcomes of any social group:
  - Lower levels of school attainment
  - Higher risk of unemployment, poverty and homelessness
  - Higher instances of mental health issues and substance abuse
  - Greater involvement in the criminal justice system
- Care as a protective factor – especially when stable, supportive and long-term
- Outcomes can be worse still for children 'in need'

# SOME DEFINITIONAL NOTES

- Seminar will focus mainly on England – key differences across the UK
- **Care-experienced students** are those who spent any time in care as children
- **Care leavers** are those who were in care for a continuous three month period straddling their 16<sup>th</sup> birthday – a formal status
- Care leavers have access to extensive ‘leaving care’ support from their local authority – personal adviser, funding, accommodation support and more
- Care-experienced students do not receive this support

# TIMELINE OF KEY POLICIES



# A BUSY TIME FOR RESEARCH



- ***Moving on up: pathways of care leavers and care-experienced students into and through higher education*** – Neil Harrison (2017)
- ***Pathways to university from care: findings report one*** – Katie Ellis and Claire Johnston (2019)
- ***‘Being a student with care experience is very daunting’: findings from a survey of care experienced students in Scottish colleges and universities*** – Linda O’Neill et al. (2019)
- ***12 by 24*** – Centre for Social Justice (2019)
- ***Getting it right for care leavers in higher education*** – Hanan Hauari et al. (2019)
- ***Positive impact? What factors affect access, retention and graduate outcomes for university students with a background of care or family estrangement?*** – Jacqueline Stevenson et al. (2020)

# MORE OFFICIAL DATA AVAILABLE



- **DfE Widening Participation reports:**
  - [www.gov.uk/government/collections/widening-participation-in-higher-education](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/widening-participation-in-higher-education)
- **Office for Students reports:**
  - [www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics](http://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/publications/differences-in-student-outcomes-further-characteristics)
- **Bespoke Higher Education Statistics Agency datasets:**
  - [www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students)
- **Linked National Pupil Database data:**
  - [www.gov.uk/guidance/how-to-access-department-for-education-dfe-data-extracts](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/how-to-access-department-for-education-dfe-data-extracts)

# STRUCTURE OF THE SEMINAR

**Before:** access to higher education

**During:** retention and success

**After:** graduate outcomes

**Next:** what we don't know...

# BEFORE

# SOME QUICK ACCESS FACTS

Around 7,000 care-experienced students in higher education in England

13% of care leavers participate in higher education by the age of 19 – improving slowly

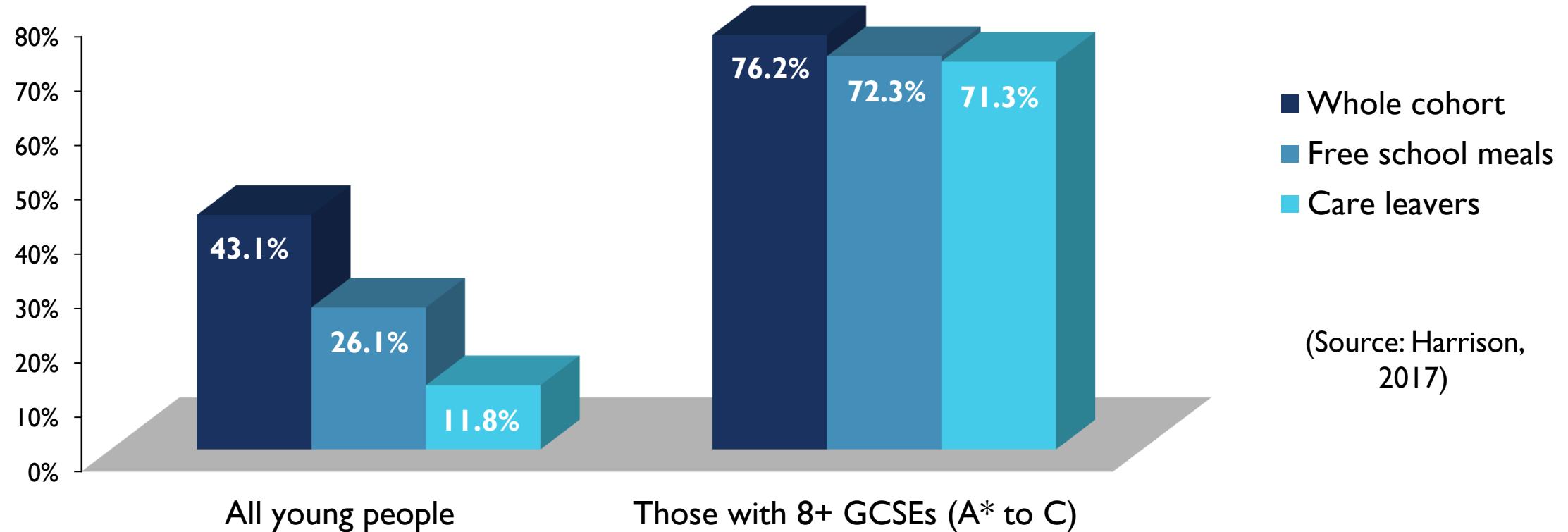
Over half of care-experienced full-time students are aged over 20 on entry

Estimated that 30% of care-experienced adults will access higher education at some point

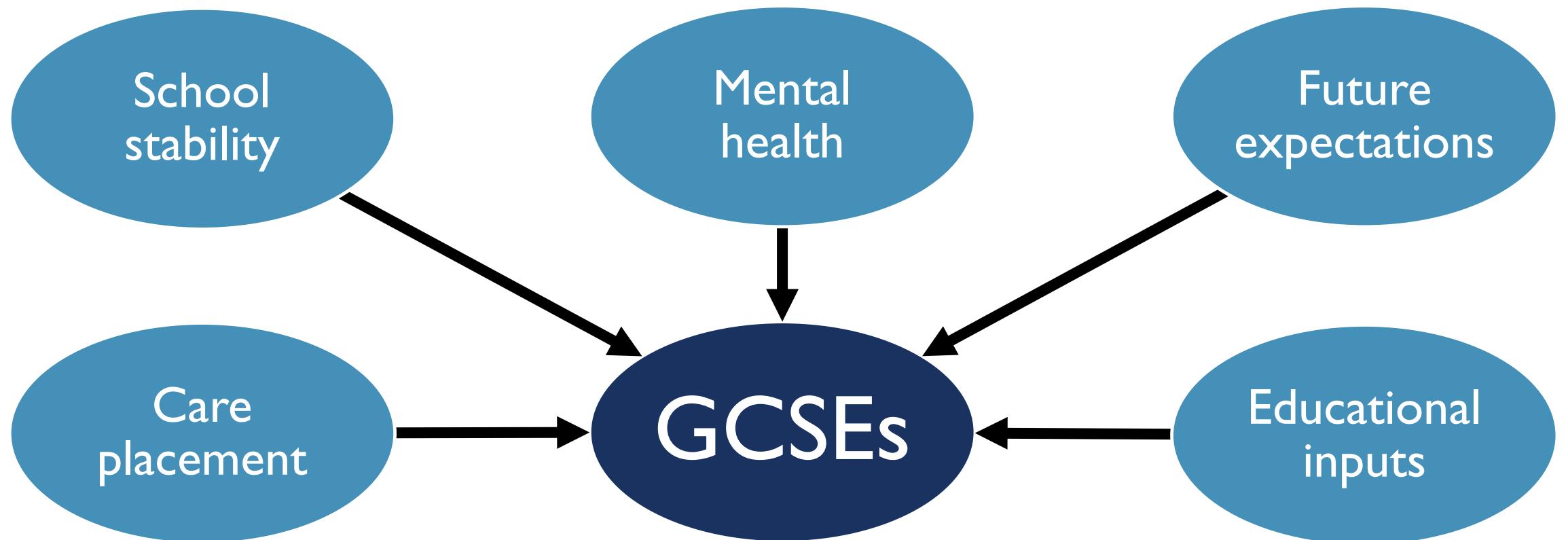
Compares with 43% in the general population – one of the most under-represented groups

Sources: Harrison (2017) and Department for Education (2020)

# THE ROLE OF ATTAINMENT



# A COMPLEX PICTURE



# PRESSURE POINTS

- Young people with mid-range GCSE results – esp. missing passes in English or Maths
  - Access to Level 3 courses – traditional pathway into higher education
  - Quality of educational information, advice and guidance
- Young people with high-level GCSE results and special educational needs (esp. mental health issues and long-term illness)
  - Concerns about continuity of support – switch from child > adult services
  - Concerns about accommodation, finance and coping with higher education

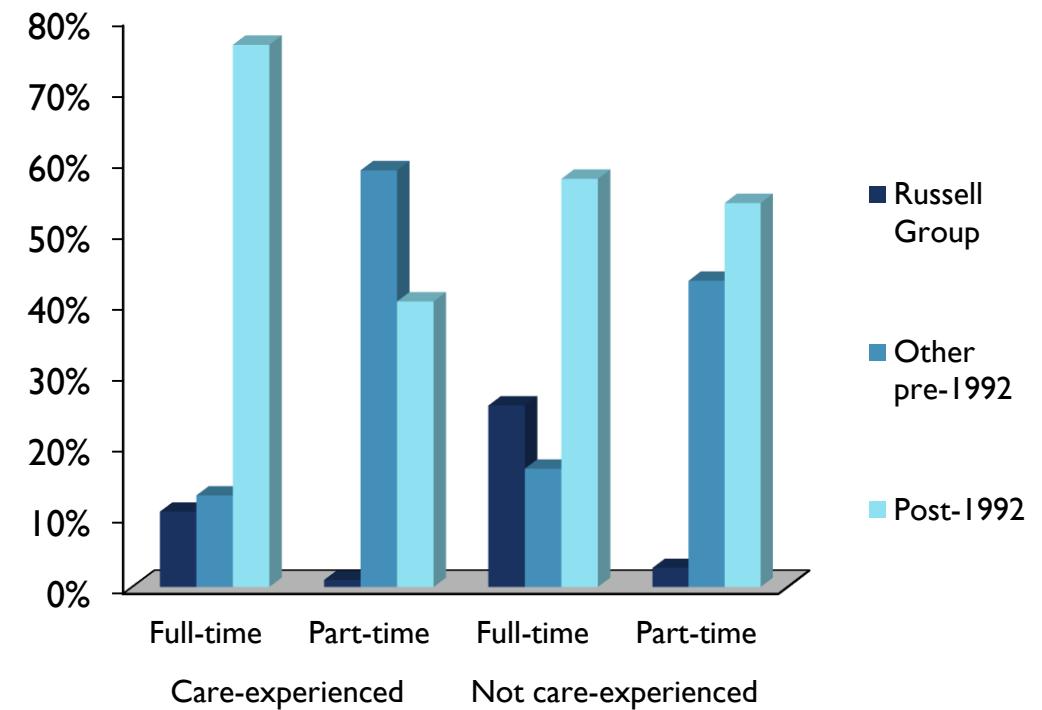
# WHAT ABOUT THE REST...?

- Many young people are simply not in a position to attain as high as they might at 16 or 18
- Care-experienced students are much more likely to make use of alternative routes into higher education – a bit later in life:
  - Vocational qualifications
  - Access to Higher Education diplomas
  - Work-based learning, including foundation degrees



# ACCESS TO WHAT...?

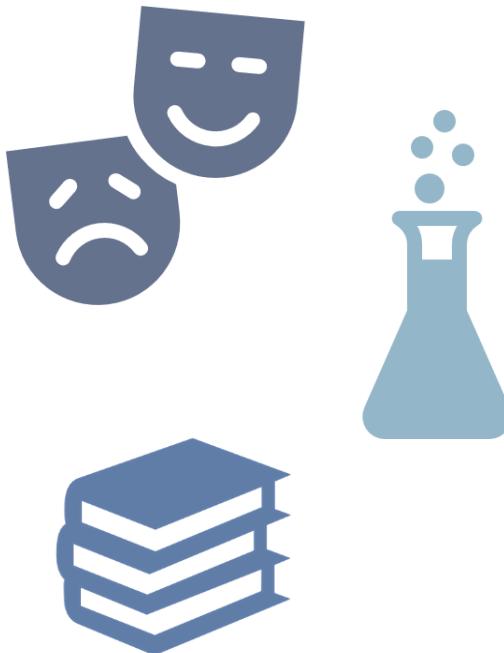
- Care-experienced students are over-represented in lower status forms of higher education:
  - Post-1992 institutions
  - Sub-degree courses
- Some subject concentrations:
  - More in social sciences, creative arts and computing
  - Fewer in natural sciences and humanities



(Source: Harrison, 2017)

# DURING

# SOME HEADLINE FINDINGS



Harrison (2017) and  
Office for Students (2020)

- Care leavers are nearly twice as likely to leave in their first year as other students – about 13%
- Overall, about 1.38 times more likely to withdraw early compared to otherwise similar students
- Reasons for withdrawal similar to other students – ‘academic’ reasons are the most common reported
- If care leavers complete their degree, just as likely to get first or upper second as other students with similar entry qualifications

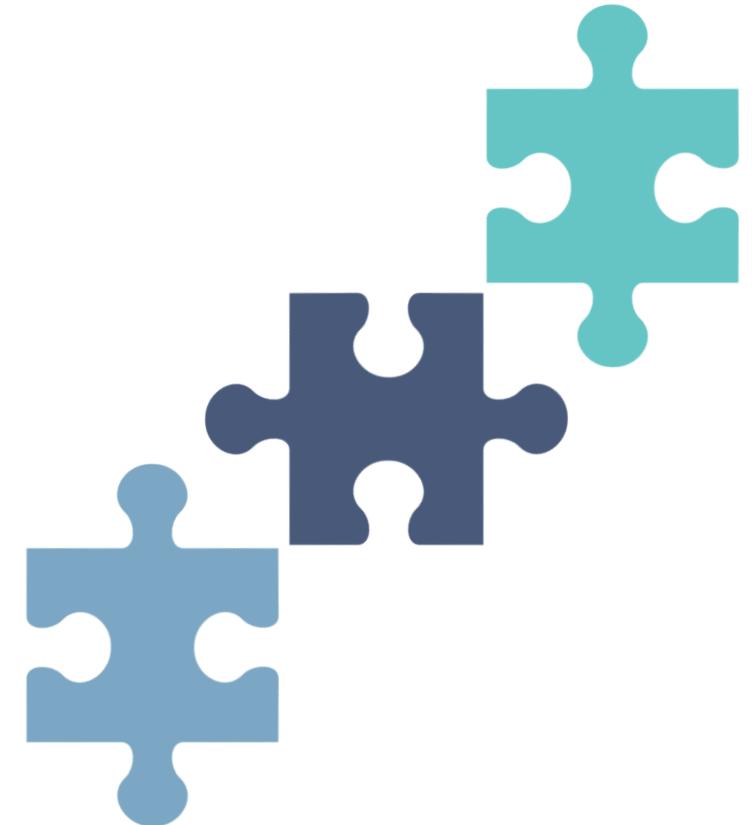
# IMPORTANCE OF TRANSITIONS

- Wrong/changing/old information about support
- Need for liaison between local authority, university and foster carers – managed transition
- Difficulties getting paperwork for financial support, accommodation and/or immigration
- Inappropriate accommodation offers
- Practical help with moving away (or staying put) – black bags and taxis!



# FITTING IN AND GETTING ON

- Anxieties about new community and fears about stigma and/or ignorance
- Need to consider the 'strategy' for their new environment – visibility of care experience
- Importance of relationships with key academic staff – awareness of care-related issues
- Isolation for some living-at-home students – with foster carers or in pre-university home



# THRIVING AT UNIVERSITY

- Fragile academic identities – managing gaps and setbacks
- Continuity of mental health support – access to specialist therapeutic services
- Difficulties negotiating disability support
- Assistance with childcare – financial and practical
- Issues with financial management and independent living
- Importance of ‘single point of contact’ – advocate and guide in higher education bureaucracy



# AFTER

# NATIONAL GRADUATE DATA



Stevenson et al. (2020)

- Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey
- Data on those graduating in 2016/17 – snapshot around six months after graduation
- Focus here on 171,680 graduates, including 1,010 (0.6%) self-declared care-experienced graduates:
  - UK 'home' only – no EU or international students
  - Full-time only – no PT students (as little data on care)
  - Degree level – no sub-degree or postgraduate

# HEADLINE OUTCOMES

Rees Centre



## Working only

Care-experienced  
60.9%

Other  
graduates  
66.6%

## Studying only

Care-experienced  
20.7%

Other  
graduates  
18.7%

## Work + study mix

Care-experienced  
7.2%

Other  
graduates  
5.9%

## Unemployed

Care-experienced  
5.5%

Other  
graduates  
4.4%

## Other activities

Care-experienced  
5.7%

Other  
graduates  
4.4%

# POSITIVE GRADUATE OUTCOMES



**‘Positive  
graduate  
outcome’**

=

**‘Professional’  
job role**

or

**Postgraduate/  
professional  
study**

- 70.1% of care-experienced graduates, compared to 72.3% of other graduates – non-significant difference ( $p = 0.134$ )
- Strong relationship with degree class, university type, age and nationality

# SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

- Patterns of graduate outcomes quite similar for care-experienced graduates
- Slightly less likely to be in work after six months:
  - Less likely to be in ‘professional’ work – but same overall income profile
  - Non-UK nationals more likely to be unemployed, plus graduates with lower degree classes and from universities outside the Russell Group
- Significantly more likely to be in postgraduate study after six months:
  - Less likely to be studying in Russell Group universities across all degree outcomes
  - More likely among disabled students and those from minority ethnic communities

# A TRANSFORMATIVE EXPERIENCE

- Data demonstrate care-experienced students can thrive in higher education
- Once degree results are factored in, outcomes are actually slightly better than for other graduates
- Higher education as a comfortable and supportive space – path into ‘caring’ professions
- Potentially some anxieties about entering labour market – fear of stigma and limited mobility
- Cautionary note: a strong survivor effect



# WHAT WE DON'T KNOW...

# GAPS IN OUR KNOWLEDGE (I)

- 1** Anything much about care-experienced students (a) in further education colleges, (b) on part-time programmes, or (c) over the age of 23.
- 2** What interventions (pre- or post-16) by schools or universities are most effective in changing higher education trajectories or improving transitions.
- 3** How 'second chance' pathways into higher education should be best configured for care-experienced people.

# GAPS IN OUR KNOWLEDGE (2)

- 4** The best model for holistic support at university, especially with respect to academic success and its relationship to mental health.
- 5** What happens to care-experienced graduates more than six months after graduation and the underpinning reasons for their career choices.
- 6** Whether different types of care (e.g. foster vs. residential) influence higher education outcomes, with respect to access, success and graduation.

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