

Young People in Care: Aspirations and Experiences of Progressing to Further or Higher Education

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Young people in care progressing from secondary to tertiary education remains relatively low despite support they may receive from a variety of sources. In 2015, less than a quarter of 19 to 21 year-old care leavers were in further or higher education (HE). This study aimed to explore perceptions and aspirations of young people in care considering progressing to further or higher education. In particular, we were keen to identify where they currently seek advice and guidance, the resources they access and some of the challenges they face in making an informed decision.

The study included focus groups and interviews with the key stakeholders (young people in care, care leavers in HE, social workers, Virtual School teams, foster carers and other key workers). This provided a rich picture of young people's ambitions, the breadth of advice and guidance available and the importance of personal relationships in supporting these young people.

The findings suggest that young people seek advice from a range of sources. However, sometimes the guidance given is felt to be limited or incomplete. One of the overwhelming findings was the sense that 'college or university is not for me' – that it is not the 'natural' progression that it may be for their peers, that they do not have the social, financial or cultural capital required to continue into further or higher education. For those young people who *do* make this transition, it is clear that ongoing individual support provided by the institution will help overcome the ongoing personal, financial and academic challenges they may face.

This study has identified the support and commitment available to young people in care and also highlighted their increasing reliance on online resources. As well as using such technology for social purposes (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) they also use online sites to seek further information, clarify uncertainties and help in their decision-making. It is clear that the relationship they have with one or more of their key contacts is crucial in helping them develop the confidence and knowledge to progress to further or higher education. This paper will explore the impact of strong versus 'spoiled' relationships (Duck 1996) in initial decision-making and the value of a bespoke online application as a single point of reference for the step-by-step processes of applying to a college or university, details of what they can expect from continuing to tertiary education and the support that would be available to them.

Duck, S. and Wood, J., 1995 *Confronting Relationship Challenges*. SAGE Publications