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CASE STUDY REPORT:

SUPPORT FOR CARE- EXPERIENCED STUDENTS

ST MARY'S UNIVERSITY

Date: March 2021

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INTRODUCTION

Established in 1850, St Mary's has a strong reputation for teaching excellence and a student-centred approach. St Mary's offers a variety of undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes, ranging from sport to communications, business to drama and from politics to teaching.

St Mary's has around 40 students who are care-experienced¹; this number has been steady increasing over the past 4 years. Over time, the institution had gradually built on the range and depth of support provided to this cohort of students across the entire lifecycle to ensure that they are not unfairly disadvantaged by their care histories when progressing into, through, and out of higher education (HE). This has been continually developed into a comprehensive package that provides financial, emotional, pastoral, transition, employability, and accommodation support. St Mary's also regularly reflects on how support for care-experienced students can be improved and extended, and engage with feedback from their students to implement more components to this support. Today, the University's care-experienced student support package evidences multiple elements of research-informed best practice.

This Case Study will outline St Mary's approach to supporting care-experienced students, their rationale informing the implementation of this support, as well as outcomes while connecting this to best practice recommendations from the research literature.

ST MARY'S CARE-EXPERIENCED STUDENT SUPPORT PACKAGE

St Mary's package of support for care-experienced students has been continually developed over the years. This consists of transition, financial, accommodation, pastoral and employability support with multiple measures being implemented for each of these areas. This support also spans the whole student lifecycle, beginning at the pre-entry stage and lasts up to graduation and beyond.

RATIONALE

The primary rationale underpinning all aspects of St Mary's support package is to remove constraints to HE access, success and progression for care-experienced students to provide them with the same opportunities as non-care-experienced students:

'The rationale is 'why should these students not be able to succeed at higher education the same as any other student, because they've got all of these barriers?' So its about removing the barriers that these students have had, to allow them to have the same opportunities and experiences that anyone else would have.

(Rebecca Hughes, St Mary's Named Care Leaver Contact)

A large amount of the support implemented by St Mary's has been based on students' feedback of what would be helpful for them. This is highly valued when creating new packages of support for care-experienced students, as Rebecca Hughes (St Mary's Named Care Leaver Contact) explains:

They're the ones that know what support they need or would like and if there is anything that we don't do that they would find helpful, they highlight it and if it's possible for us to implement it, we will.

Feedback mechanisms for this are kept intentionally informal, as the institution has observed that this has been more effective than relaying on formal processes (such as conducting surveys with care-experienced students which tend to receive no response). Non-response to more formal feedback processes may be a result of care-leavers having to engage in high levels of bureaucracy with local authorities during their time in care (Ellis and Johnston, 2020). This may result in apprehensions as to why institutions (such as HE institutions) are requesting this information from them (Stevenson et al., 2020). St Mary's recognised that asking for feedback in informal conversations during check-ins with their Named Care Leaver Contact was more productive. This more informal 'space' with a trusted person allows the Named Care Leaver Contact to request feedback in a more personable way, while explaining the reasons for asking for this information.

SUPPORTING CARE-EXPERIENCED STUDENTS: EVIDENCE FROM THE LITERATURE

The experiences and support needs of care-experienced students in HE is relatively under researched; this a result of the low proportion of such students progressing to HE, with this being just 12% of the care-experienced population (up to the age of 23) (Harrison, 2020). Yet, more recently, research into 'what works' for care-experienced students in relation to accessing, progressing through, and out of HE has been growing (Ellis and Johnston, 2020; Harrison, 2017; Stevenson et al., 2020). This research has put forward a number of recommendations for effectively supporting care-experienced students throughout the student lifecycle, particularly in areas such as pastoral, emotional, mental health, financial, accommodation, and employability support.

The research literature has highlighted how having an adult that care-experienced students can trust is key to successful transitions into, and through, HE (Driscoll, 2013; Harrison et al., 2020). Having a dedicated 'care leaver contact' has been highlighted as best practice not only as a means of providing students with this trusted adult that they can contact for support during their time in HE, but also to enable students to more easily access support across the whole institution via this single point of contact (Stevenson et al., 2020). Stevenson et al.'s (2020) national study into care-experienced students' HE access, progression and outcomes for instance found that the bureaucratic systems that students were required to engage with to access support at university frequently acted as a barrier; the research recommended that support from a single point of contact (such as a named care leaver contact) not only in the form of signposting, but also in terms of providing hands-on support in helping students navigate

these processes (for example, helping them to complete paper work and application forms) was incredibly valuable. Ideally, such support should begin from the pre-entry stage of students' transition into HE (Harrison, 2017).

In addition to having a named single point of contact, care-experienced students have been found to value 'small expressions of care' from their HE institution (Stevenson et al., 2020). Examples cited by students in Stevenson et al.'s (2020) research included being sent a Christmas card, a text on their birthday, being invited for a coffee, and 'check-in' emails from tutors and/or their named care leaver contact to ask how they were doing; this helped students to feel that their institution cared about them as individuals. This is especially important when considering that many care-experienced students have had numerous experiences with bureaucratic systems of support during their time in care which, as Ellis and Johnston's (2020) research highlighted, made those with care-experience feel like they were receiving a 'checklist' rather than genuine care.

The provision of financial support to care-experienced students has also been identified as playing an essential role in successful transitions into and through HE (Jackson et al., 2005; Driscoll, 2013). The level of financial support via local authorities and HE institutions available to care-experienced students increased nationally following Jackson et al.'s (2005) ground breaking 'By Degrees' project. Yet, despite substantial progress being made in this area, care-experienced students have reported financial hardship at specific times of year, namely over the summer months (Stevenson et al., 2020). Hence, recommendations have been put forward for HE institutions to a) provide a bursary to care-experienced students over the summer, and b) ensure that care-experienced students are made aware of the 'summer bursaries' available from their local authority (Stevenson et al., 2020).

The provision of financial support has been noted as being particularly important in reducing the threat of homelessness for care-experienced students (Stevenson et al., 2020). This is noteworthy to highlight, as those who have been in the care system are more likely to encounter difficulties with housing and homelessness (Häggman-Laitila et al. 2018) – largely as a result of having few or no family 'safety nets' (Baker et al., forthcoming). This, in turn, can lead to restricted housing options for care-experienced students; for example, Harrison's (2017) research found that those with care-experience who had been provided with council accommodation felt fearful to leave this to reside in halls of residence, which sometimes led students to negotiate long commutes to their institution. To broaden the landscape of accommodation choices for care-experienced students, Stevenson et al. (2020) recommended that HE institutions offer financial support to pay deposits and rent (even if they are residing in the private rented sector), as well as making university accommodation available 365 days per year.

Allowing care-experienced students to reside in university accommodation for longer during their final year of study has also been recommended to provide stability while they locate and transition into employment and/or further study (Harrison et al., 2020; Stevenson et al., 2020). In addition to ensuring that this stability is available for care-experienced students as they

negotiate their transitions out of HE, research in this area has proposed that providing a bursary towards the end of their studies (Stevenson et al., 2020) as well as lifetime careers support (Baker et al., forthcoming; Harrison et al., 2020) can maximise care-experienced graduates' chances of successfully transitioning out of HE.

In addition to support provided directly to students, research has raised that there is a need for awareness raising amongst all staff in the HE sector about the needs of care-experienced students. Stevenson et al (2020) found that awareness and understanding of the challenges encountered by care-experienced students, as well as their support needs, was inconsistent across HE institutions. This subsequently reduced opportunities for students to access support until they were at crisis point, as awareness gaps amongst staff led to issues with effective signposting to relevant services. Hence, investment into staff training has been proposed as a means of avoiding such issues; not only will this enable staff to understand what support may be appropriate to signpost care-experienced students to, but can help prevent students slipping through the net (Stevenson et al., 2020).

THE APPROACH

St Mary's University has built a comprehensive support package for care-experienced students covering all aspects of the student lifecycle. Importantly, the support offered is consistent with the recommendations provided in the literature outlined in the previous section. Hence, this demonstrates numerous elements of best practice in the support provided to care-experienced students at St Mary's University. Table 1 provides an overview of the various strands of support provided to care-experienced students at the institution.

Table 1: Care-experienced support at St Mary's University

Support area	Specific support provided
Pre-entry & Transition	<p>Provision of a 'named contact': Students are contacted to provide access to a 'Named Care Leaver Contact' as soon as they register with St Mary's. The named contact continues to provide support throughout the whole duration of students' studies. This consists of any support need required; the named contact can organise the support required, provide information as needed, or signpost students where appropriate.</p>
	<p>Pre-Entry Summer Meeting: Students are invited to attend a meeting (accompanied by a Social Worker, Personal Advisor, friend, or family member if they wish) with the Named Care Leaver Contact prior to commencing their studies at the institution. The purpose of this is to ensure that students have their student finance and accommodation in place, make them aware of potential local authority support they may be entitled to, provide them with an opportunity to raise any concerns, as well as to familiarise them with the institution and Named Care Leaver Contact. During this meeting, students are provided with a campus tour, and are also shown their accommodation (if applicable).</p>
	<p>Priority invite to the 'Get Set for Success' programme: St Mary's pre-enrolment 'Get Set for Success' programme offers a variety of sessions on university life and social events, as well as opportunities for one-to-ones with support services. This intends to support successful transitions into the university. The programme is available to all WP students, though care-experienced students are provided with a priority invite to join.</p>
Financial	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A £3000 bursary per academic year for undergraduate and postgraduate students. • A Summer Fund provided to cover living costs over the summer period. • Priority access to the Hardship Fund.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Graduation ceremony package: Covers the cost of gown hire, photographs and tickets (including tickets for two guests). • A Graduation Award of £1000 to meet the costs of whatever is needed at the end of students' studies (such as rent and travel to interviews) to allow them to focus on locating employment. This is provided in addition to the Summer Fund in students' final year.
Accommodation	<p>Guaranteed accommodation: Care-experienced students are guaranteed accommodation at the start of the academic year.</p>
	<p>365 Accommodation: Care-experienced students are able to access university accommodation 365 days per year. This is not restricted to the start of the academic year, meaning that students are able to access this at any point during their studies to protect them against homelessness. Care-experienced students are given priority when requiring accommodation mid-way through the year; in the rare case that no rooms are available on campus, students are supported in finding appropriate alternative accommodation.</p>
	<p>Deposit waiver: If care-experienced students apply to reside in student accommodation, their housing deposit is waived by the University.</p>
	<p>Support with moving day: St Mary's recognises that the weekend allocated to students to move in to their accommodation can be overwhelming. This can be especially so for care-experienced students who often do not have others to support them with their move. To support care-experienced students on moving day, the University's Named Care Leaver Contact offers to meet them, introduce them to their Resident Mentor, and help them move in.</p>

	<p>Accommodation Welcome Pack (2021): St Mary's have introduced an accommodation 'Welcome Pack' which will commence in the 2021/22 academic year. These include essentials such as bedding, toiletries and snacks which are left on care-experienced students' beds (if residing in halls) for when they move in. This has been implemented following feedback received from care-experienced students; some explained how they arrived at university without any essential items.</p>
<p>Pastoral (including 'small acts of care')</p>	<p>The majority of pastoral, emotional and 'small acts of care' are provided by St Mary's Named Care Leaver Contact. This support includes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy access to the University's support services, such as wellbeing, accommodation and the careers service via their Named Care Leaver Contact. • Regular 'check-ins' with care-experienced students at key points in the year, such as exam periods, Christmas, Easter, summer, and any other time where students may be on campus alone. • Invites to coffee mornings. These were originally implemented during the pandemic but will continue following positive feedback from students. In the past, these have taken a 'drop-in' format (virtually) where care-experienced students can attend to chat openly about any topic. Future coffee mornings will be based on specific strands of support, advice and information, such as a 'Careers Coffee Morning' for second and third year students. • Care-experienced students being sent Christmas cards from the institution. <p>The Named Care Leaver Contact also has links with the Richmond Christmas Day Dinner, an annual Christmas day event for those with care experience who are aged 18 to 25. As a result of St Mary's links with this, care-experienced students at the institution are able to apply to attend this event.</p>

Employability	Access to paid work opportunities at St Mary's: Care-experienced students are provided an automatic interview for the institution's paid Student Ambassador schemes. They are also prioritised when accessing the paid WP Intern Scheme at the institution.
	Opportunities for paid and voluntary summer work: Care-experienced students at St Mary's are provided with opportunities to undertake paid summer work and voluntary roles at First Star Scholars UK .
	Provision of lifelong careers support: All St Mary's alumni can access lifelong careers support at the institution.
Awareness Raising & Training	Staff training and awareness raising: Training is provided via workshops to St Mary's staff to raise awareness of what being a 'care leaver' or 'care-experienced' means, the typical barriers encountered by care leavers, and how support provision can make a difference in helping students succeed in their studies. This has bridged gaps in identifying and providing support to care leave students across the whole institution.
	Raising community awareness: St Mary's has a representative who sits on the board that converses with local boroughs about the WP work undertaken, and support provided by the institution. This information is then passed on to the Virtual Schools in order to raise awareness of St Mary's amongst those involved in supporting care leavers outside of the institution.

OUTCOMES

The comprehensive programme of support offered to care-experienced students by St Mary's University has been praised by students via informal feedback mechanisms. There have also been indications that the continual development of support, particularly financial support such as the Summer Fund, has aided in retention. Considering that care-experienced students are 38% more likely to withdraw from their HE studies than their peers (Harrison, 2017), this demonstrates that the support measures in place at St Mary's University are fostering an enabling influence on their successful progression through HE.

As noted earlier, St Mary's University found that informal feedback channels (with care-experienced students providing verbal or written feedback to their Named Care Leaver Contact) was the most effective approach in garnering responses. Below, feedback from students via these informal channels is provided on different aspects of the support that St Mary's University provides.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT

One student explained how the Pre-Entry Summer Meeting prior to officially commencing their studies at the University was vitally important in informing them of the range of financial support they could receive:

When starting university, I was informed and educated on the type of support I can receive as a care leaver and if not for that meeting I would have never known the help I could get. I've been able to receive financial support which has aided me greatly especially during this pandemic.

This is important to highlight, as one of the most frequently cited barriers to accessing support cited in the research literature is lack of awareness amongst care-experienced students of that they are entitled to (Stevenson et al., 2020). Ensuring that students are aware of the available support prior to entry, as shown here, is valuable in preventing them from slipping through the net.

The student also went on to express how the University's Summer Fund was helpful in enabling them to pay their bills, rent and general maintenance costs:

The summer fund has helped me the most as during that time I don't receive much income and that support aided me in paying my bills and rent as well as having some money for my upkeep. I am so thankful for every way in which I have received support.

Provision of financial support over the summer months, as noted earlier, has been cited as an element of best practice in helping care-experienced students avoid homelessness and stress through financial hardship (Stevenson et al., 2020).

SUPPORT FROM A NAMED CARE LEAVER CONTACT

The provision of a Named Care Leaver Contact, as previously noted, has been cited as an example of best practice to provide students with a) a trusted adult that they can turn to at the institution (Driscoll, 2013) and b) a single point of contact to access the support they require, reducing the barrier of bureaucracy (Stevenson et al., 2020). These benefits are summarised in the below by a St Mary's University student:

I was supported with everything from applying for accommodation, to completing paperwork and the support from there has been endless. I am now able to confidently go to Rebecca (the Named Care Leaver Contact) whenever I am struggling with anything, and she does her very best to help fix the situation... the most valuable thing about being a care leaver at St Mary's is how important I am made to feel.

In line with best practice, support from a Named Care Leaver Contact should ideally start at the Pre-Entry stage (Harrison, 2017). This is practiced at St Mary's University, with the Named Care Leaver Contact reaching out to students as soon as they register, as well as an invite to a Pre-Entry Summer Meeting. One student explained how this made them feel 'secure' at the institution:

Before I had even received my exam results and my place at the uni had been guaranteed I was being supported by Rebecca, and this made me feel so secure when I arrived knowing that I already had somebody who had my back from day one.

MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORT

There is an overrepresentation of mental health issues in the care-experienced population (O'Neill et al., 2019), often arising from a history of disruption, instability, and/or childhood maltreatment (Centre for Social Justice, 2019). Explorations of support provision in HE have identified that accessing suitable mental health support within their institution still continue to be a challenge faced by many care-experienced students (Harrison, 2017; Stevenson et al., 2020).

As explained earlier though, ensuring that support services can easily be accessed via a trusted, named single point of contact coupled with broader staff training to raise awareness of the needs of care-experienced students (which is also provided at St Mary's University) maximises the chances of students receiving the specific forms of support they require (Stevenson et al., 2020). This is evidenced in the below feedback, with one student explaining how they were offered various options to help them with their mental health:

The support that St Marys has offered me throughout my university degree has been phenomenal. They take great care in giving students the best support they can give to help you through university life. When my mental health was really bad, St Marys

offered me various options in which they could help me and gave me various options which would benefit me... St Marys have helped me and so many more students overcome fears and vulnerabilities that may limit them in their everyday lives.

EMOTIONAL SUPPORT AND 'SMALL EXPRESSIONS OF CARE'

Stevenson et al.'s (2020) research highlighted how 'small expressions of care' offered by HE institutions are highly valued by care-experienced students. Examples of these small-scale interventions include being sent a Christmas card, receiving check-in emails, and being invited for a coffee.

While St Mary's Named Care Leaver Contact sends regular check-in emails to care-experienced students (see table 1), the institution began also sending Christmas cards in 2020. This was initiated by concerns over care-experienced students feeling isolated during the Covid-19 pandemic. Yet, this is a practice that is now going to be maintained for the foreseeable future having following positive feedback on this:

The support has been amazing. I always feel as though St Mary's has gone above and beyond to make sure that I am ok. The little things that they do such as sending me a Christmas card makes the biggest difference.

FUTURE PLANS

To further enhance their support package for care-experienced students, St Mary's University are currently in the early stages of planning the implementation of a peer mentoring scheme with a focus on academic skills development. The institution's thinking has been developed by research evidence; both peer support (Stevenson et al., 2020) and the development of academic skills for care-experienced students (Harrison, 2017; Cotton et al., 2014; Stevenson et al., 2020) have been recommended as ways to increase retention (Harrison, 2017) and feelings of belonging (Stevenson et al., 2020).

SEER have been collaborating with St Mary's University on the development of this programme. So far, this has included offering research-informed guidance in the initial stages of formulating the focus for peer support, and advising on how the programme could be organised to encourage peer mentor involvement. Going forwards, SEER will be continuing to collaborate with St Mary's University to assist with developing the programme content.

NOTES

1. Children who are still in care at the age of 16 (and have been in care for 3 months or more since the age of 14) are deemed as 'care leavers'; this also includes those who enter the care system at age 16 or 17 (Harrison, 2017). There are also those who are regarded as 'care experienced' (CE), who have

spent time in care earlier in their lives, but do not meet the formal definition of a 'care leaver'. 'Care-experienced' is used throughout this report to be inclusive of both 'care leavers' and those who are 'care-experienced'.

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