



Better Futures:

Giving adopted young people an equal chance in further education

adoptionuk
for every adoptive family

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FOREWORD

This report was compiled before the outbreak of Covid-19 early in 2020. The period of lockdown shone a bright light on the impact of differing economic, family and personal circumstances on children's ability to learn, to participate and to thrive.

However, the crisis also highlighted the flexibility, passion and expertise of the education sector in the UK as settings and educators responded to the rapidly changing landscape with a raft of new resources, personalised approaches and innovative solutions.

As thoughts begin to turn to the aftermath of Covid-19, the focus has moved increasingly to recognising the importance of wellbeing and mental health, and to ensuring that children who have already experienced disadvantage are not further left behind. It is in this context that we now publish this report, confident that the same determination to provide the very best opportunities for all children during the crisis can now be turned towards ensuring that every young person has an equal chance in further education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report could not have been produced without the generosity and honesty of those adopted adults who gave their time, either through interviews or the survey, to share their personal experiences of education. We are grateful for their willingness to raise their voices in support of this project.

We extend our particular thanks to our young interviewees, Anna, Amy, Rachel, Ethan, Jack and Sarah*, who bravely articulated their often difficult experiences in education so that this report could shine a light on the experiences of adopted young people, to the benefit of all who will follow them through the system.

Thanks also to Fiona Templeton and Rebecca Best, who shared with us the findings of their own academic research of the experiences of adopted young people in education. Their contribution has added breadth and depth to this report.

*all names have been changed

Better Futures is the sixth in a series of education reports by Adoption UK, all making the case for a radical re-think in our education system to ensure that the most vulnerable children and young people have an equal chance to thrive and to succeed.

Previous reports are available on Adoption UK's website:

- *Exclusions and Special Educational Needs* (2017)
- *Bridging the Gap* (2018)
- *Top of the Class* (2019)
- *The Adoption Barometer - In Focus: Education* (2019)
- *Home learning during the Covid-19 lockdown* (2020)

HEADLINES

- 34% of survey respondents were not in education, employment or training (NEET) at some point between the ages of 16 and 24
- 61% said that they struggled at secondary school and found it a negative experience on the whole
- 91% of under 25s felt that they needed more support than their peers at secondary school and just under half of all respondents felt that their academic attainment would have been better had they received more support
- Just under half of the survey respondents who had attended college within one year of finishing school (early enrollers) felt that there were not enough relevant FE options to choose from, and 57% said that they needed a lot of adult support to choose and apply for courses
- Of the early enrollers who declared their adoptive status to their college, more than two thirds were not offered any additional support as a result
- Survey respondents who enrolled at college more than one year after leaving school (later enrollers) were slightly more positive about their experience on the whole, and more likely to feel able to ask for help and support if they needed it
- 30% of early enrollers did not complete their college course
- The drop-out rate for later enrollers was lower, at 18%

“I think one of the things I’ve always struggled with, which is probably mostly to do with being adopted, is big changes, and I still find them difficult now. The first six months of college were really hard. I did not enjoy it. It was very stressful. I think college was probably the hardest bit of my education.”

Sarah, an adopted adult and university graduate

It is well-established that adopted children face particular challenges through their school lives. *Better Futures* demonstrates that these challenges continue through further education and indeed into adult life.

Much of what was described by adopted people aged 16 and older in this report is mirrored by adoptive parents and adopted children and young people in previous Adoption UK reports about experiences in school. Despite recent initiatives in some parts of the UK to acknowledge the serious impact of adverse early experiences, time spent in care, and transition to permanence, the gap between what adopted and care-experienced children and young people need, and what is offered to them is still wide, and becomes even wider as they grow older and begin to age out of statutory provisions.

The current lack of awareness of their needs and subsequent failure of our education system to effectively support them has a dramatic impact, not only in terms of attainment, but also on mental health, motivations to continue with education, and long-term prospects.

The young adults who participated in interviews, and survey respondents of all ages were very clear about what support they needed through their education, and what would have helped them. In light of their views, we suggest the following recommendations:

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Lay strong foundations in schools:** close gaps in understanding, resourcing and attainment for adopted children and young people in primary and secondary education
- **Provide realistic post-16 options for all young people:** provide enhanced careers and transition support to post-16 education for all care-experienced young people, and ensure that a range of suitable options is available in all areas, including work-based options
- **Support all students to have an equal chance in post-16 education:** mandatory training in relevant areas for all staff members, and designated staff members in every setting with responsibility to pro-actively support care-experienced students; extend existing support mechanisms available in school, or available only to care leavers, to include care-experienced students post-16
- **Use quality data to drive continual improvement:** introduce mechanisms for all applicants to further education to declare their care-experienced status, and all governments to use this self-declaration as a basis for collecting and analysing data on the enrolment, attainment and drop-out rate of care-experienced and adopted students in order to formulate future policy.

INTRODUCTION

Adoption UK's *Adoption Barometer (2019)* revealed the significant challenges facing adopted young people as they approached adulthood. 39% of those aged 16-25 had accessed mental health services during 2018, and this same group was twice as likely to be not in education, employment or training (NEET) as their peers, which is linked to negative long-term social and health outcomes (Ralston et al, 2013).

As a cohort, adopted young people often face significant challenges as they move into tertiary education. The traditional smooth trajectory from school to further education and on to work or higher education is out of reach for too many. Poor experiences of primary and secondary education, changes taking place during adolescence, and the additional challenges of navigating the transition to adulthood while coming to terms with a complex history and personal identity can result in young people arriving at post-16 education with unique and complex support needs. Their path through the education system is often a winding one, with many diversions along the way.

Many will have had a very difficult start in life. Three quarters of them have experienced abuse and neglect. All have lost their birth family and endured moves through the care system before finding a permanent home. In school, they are more likely to be excluded, more likely to have complex special educational needs, and more likely to leave with few or no qualifications. However, while awareness and understanding of the experiences of adopted children in school is patchy, at post-16 level, it is almost non-existent, even though education and training is now compulsory for all 16-18 year olds in England.

For *Better Futures* we have gathered the views of adopted young people and adults of all ages. They have told us in their own words about the challenges they faced in school, the difficulties of finding appropriate post-16 provision, the problems they face in the college environment, and the realities of coming back to education later in life.

Their stories are powerful, insightful and sometimes shocking. They speak of the devastating and traumatising impact of the lack of understanding of the realities of modern care experience and adoption, the failure to diagnose and support severe and complex needs, and, in some cases, exclusion from an education system that is the absolute right of every child and young person.

Yet there is also positivity and hope in tales of outstanding individuals and settings where the appalling inequality of loss, trauma, abuse and chaos, has begun to be balanced by nurture, expertise, commitment and compassion. The stories told by these adopted young people should prompt a radical overhaul of the way we support adopted and care-experienced people in further education throughout their lives, so that all those who did not have an equal start in life can have an equal chance in education.



The Voices of Adopted People

Adopted and care-experienced people are best placed to describe their own experiences of attending school and college, yet research which highlights these voices is scarce. For this report, we carried out semi-structured interviews with six adopted young people aged 16-25. The interviews focused on their experiences at secondary school, the process of choosing and applying for further education courses, and their experiences of attending further education, if that had been possible. The majority of interviewees chose to be interviewed alongside a parent, although one was interviewed alone.

The report also draws on two interviews with adopted young people carried out by Fiona Templeton of Ulster University as part of her research into adopted young people's experiences of education, as well as referencing the work of Rebecca Best, who carried out interviews with 11 adopted young people as part of PhD research at UCL Institute of Education.

Finally, we circulated a survey open to young people and adults aged 16 or older who had been raised under a legal permanence order, including adoption, special guardianship, residence order, child arrangements order, or equivalent anywhere in the UK. This survey was completed by 76 respondents, all of whom were adopted from care in the UK.

We made a deliberate decision not to exclude any care-experienced adult from the survey by imposing an upper age limit. Although many may perceive adoption and care experience to have been different in the past, the lived experiences of adopted people are relevant, no matter how long ago the adoption may have taken place, and there is much to learn from their voices across the lifespan.

During the analysis stage, we chose to differentiate between respondents who were 24 or under, and those who were over 25. This age point was chosen because 25 is the age at which many mechanisms designed to support young people expire.

Those under 25 are also more likely to have been in a position to benefit from more recent support introduced for adopted and care-experienced children and young adults, such as Pupil Premium Plus, introduced for adopted and previously looked-after children in England in 2014.

There were some clear differences between the under-25 and 25+ cohorts, most significant of which was the high academic achievement of many in the older group. 81% of respondents aged 25 or older had been educated to degree level (or equivalent) or beyond. It should be borne in mind when considering the responses of this group that, on the whole, they would now be considered 'successes' of the education system.



CASE STUDY: AMY



Now 21, Amy is not in education, employment or training. Having left school with no qualifications, Amy was rejected from every course she was interested in. In the end, her family supported her to find a college place doing a very basic course. However, this first attempt at post-16 education ended when Amy experienced a serious assault at college. Following a lengthy court case, Amy's mum, Victoria, was faced with difficult decisions about her daughter's educational future.

In England it is compulsory for young people to remain in education or training until they are 18. As Victoria recalls, "There's a pressure on children having to be in school until they're 18 and you have to find something for them. Amy didn't have the qualifications and we were thinking, oh God, what do we do? You've got to find somewhere. So, we found another college and again, it's the same problem with relationships and the chaos of a college for a girl that is already traumatised. She was a vulnerable young person and she was used by other students. She got herself caught up in awful situations."

Amy and Victoria are clear that the root of Amy's difficulties lie in her very chaotic early life and were compounded by a terrible experience at school. Amy and her sister were moved around several times before they were adopted, and Amy missed a lot of her early education. She struggled throughout her school life. Amy remembers that "no-one listened, got bullied, didn't do anything. Didn't do my work 'cos I didn't understand half of what was going on."

Now, Amy has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, dyscalculia, and a specific language impairment. She is also suspected to have FASD. However, at school, none of these difficulties were picked up. Amy masked her emotional distress at school by working hard to remain invisible and compliant. Although Victoria expressed concerns many times, she was always told that Amy would "catch up".

For Amy, the secondary school years were a long struggle to simply survive. She recalls, "I just used to stay in the toilets. I never used to go anywhere. Everyone stared at me. I always used to be the first one in the class so no-one stared at me. When I went to the toilet I didn't want to come back to class 'cos I didn't want everyone staring at me. I used to look over people's shoulders and copy their work. My work looked exactly like theirs. They should have clocked that. People used to

say, 'Oh, you can't do this? You can't do that? You must be dumb. You must be retarded.' That's all I've had all my life. Still now."

Victoria and Amy are both filled with sadness and anger about Amy's experiences of education. "The unfortunate thing is that there wasn't proper support," says Victoria. "I definitely think schools have got to be more aware that an adopted child has often experienced terrible neglect and trauma."

Amy's Story: The damaging legacy of primary and secondary education

Previous Adoption UK research has highlighted the difficulties that many adopted children and young people face in school. *Bridging the Gap* (2018) revealed the views of nearly 2,000 adopted children. Fewer than half reported being happy in school, and three quarters said that other children seem to enjoy school more than they did. Just under 80% agreed that they felt confused and worried at school, 65% consistently did not know what their teachers wanted them to do in class, and the same proportion did not feel that their teachers understood and supported their needs. Two thirds of secondary school children had been bullied at school because they were adopted.

91%



of under 25s felt that they needed more support than their peers at school.

Amy's experiences of school were particularly poor, but they were echoed in the responses of many of the adopted people who completed the Better Futures survey. Two thirds of under 25s reported that they had struggled at school, finding it a negative experience on the whole, and 91% felt that they needed more support than their peers. The majority of respondents, from all age groups, did not feel that they received the support that they needed. When asked to reflect on the qualifications they achieved at school, only 13% of under 25s, and 28% of over 25s felt that their results had been a fair reflection of their abilities. Nearly half of all respondents felt that they could have done better if more support had been offered.

"There was no awareness of or desire to address my immaturity or family complications. These were just never on any school's radar. Consequently I was treated as variously "thick", "lazy" or rebellious ... I was just written off."

Adopted adult, aged 18-24

"Because I was classed as academically able, my attachment based needs were never considered."

Adopted adult, aged 25-34

"I got bullied every year and they didn't sort it out."

Adopted young person, aged under 18

"I spent time finding my birth family when I was about 14/15 and that took up a lot of my time and made me happy and sad and very confused"

Adopted adult, aged 18-24

"I sometimes wonder if I didn't hold out for my dream because I felt I already owed so many people so much."

Adopted adult, aged 45-54

These difficult experiences left many unprepared for the transition to further education and, in some cases, unwilling to attempt it. One interviewee involved in Fiona Templeton's research on adopted young peoples' experiences of education (2019) recalled how a detention in the second year of high school affected their whole attitude towards education afterwards. The interviewee reflected on this moment as a real turning point, commenting that, "I knew fine rightly from second year that I didn't want to be in school past 5th year."

Overall, there is a sense that the transition to further education comes at the worst possible time for many adopted young people. Some are so demoralised by negative experiences at school that they simply cannot face another two years of education. For others, this is a time of life where they are coming to terms with their own life history, and dealing with the prospect or the reality of re-connecting with birth family members for the first time since early childhood. These are significant additional challenges during a time of life which is perhaps more volatile than any other. Far from diminishing as they get older, support for adopted young people needs to increase during this time if an effective transition to further education is to be possible.

CASE STUDY: JACK

In the end, Jack's experience of post-16 education was extremely positive, but the situation had not looked quite as optimistic a few years earlier when he approached the end of his time at secondary school.

School was difficult for Jack for a number of reasons. His severe dyslexia meant that he struggled academically, and he found managing peer relationships and making friends very difficult. He was bullied. As Jack says, "I didn't really like it to be honest. I didn't really have any friends so I spent most lunchtimes in a special club for people with disabilities." As he approached the end of year 11, he didn't have a clear idea about what he would do next.

His mum, Karen, remembers, "He struggled socially, he struggled cognitively. Every day he was going to school and failing so his self-esteem was in the bottom of his boots. He had a dedicated careers officer who was supposed to help him find something but when I looked at what was out there it just seemed to be more of the same. He could go on a course and then do reading and writing lessons on the side but he'd still be on a course where he didn't understand most of what was going on."

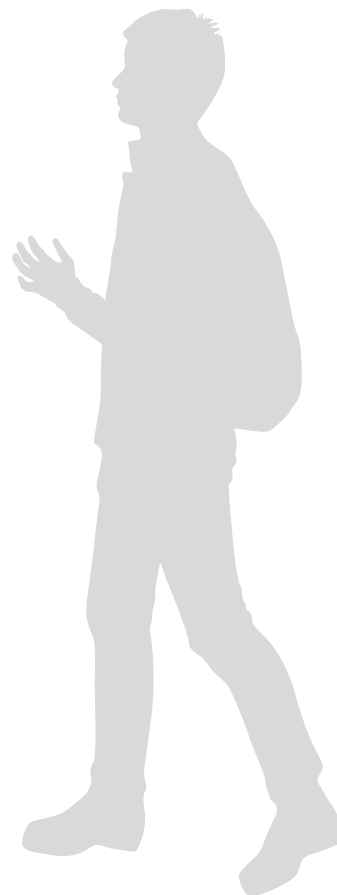
Jack and Karen decided to focus on what Jack's strengths were, and what he could do, rather than the things he struggled with. He was an active young man, always walking and cycling. He liked animals and being outside. After some searching Karen describes how she "just came across" an agricultural college which offered semi-residential courses.

From the start, the college had a positive attitude towards Jack's needs. Jack recalls, "The wardens at the boarding house were good because if I looked a bit lost or something, they'd just grab a football and go for a kickabout on the field or something. I had a lot of friends there too, and they just didn't care about my dyslexia. Some of them were dyslexic too. They were really supportive."

Jack completed his agricultural course, and then went on to complete a level 2 course in outdoor sports. The whole experience was a big boost for Jack. He did well at the practical work, mixing with people of different ages and backgrounds, and the classroom and pastoral staff made sure that he was no longer subject to bullying. As Karen says, "I always felt he was both physically and psychologically safe there. They just didn't do stigma there. It wasn't part of what happened to him."

One of the important factors in Jack's positive experience was the willingness of the college to maintain positive relationships with Jack's parents, and to encourage their involvement in working together to ensure his success. Karen recalls a time when the college told her about some difficulties Jack was experiencing and she was able to drive up to the college to meet him as he woke up the next morning and support him through it.

However, Jack's positive college experience came at a heavy cost for his family. As this was a private college, Jack's family had to make a significant financial contribution throughout his two years there. Although Karen believes it was well worth it for Jack, she knows it is not an option for every family: "Jack's done alright, but Jack's had a very supportive family. He graduated on his last day of college and then next day we drove him to start his first job. He's been in work ever since then and I'm very proud of him."



Jack's Story: The search for suitable post-16 options

Jack and his family were not alone in struggling to find appropriate further education courses. Survey respondents also found the whole process of exploring their options for further education challenging. Even the college interviews could be daunting, with more than 40% of survey respondents stating that they did not cope well with this part of their application process.

42% of survey respondents under 25 reported that they had difficulties finding information about courses that would be suitable for them, and almost half did not feel as though there was a range of relevant courses for them to choose from.

Almost

HALF



of survey respondents under 25 felt that there was not enough support available to help them choose and apply for suitable courses

“I was very lucky that near to my home there are good schools and variety of good colleges ... My half brother is adopted in a different area and he has hardly any choice of school and college. It’s the same for my friend who was in foster care with me as she also lives more in the country and has less choice than me.”

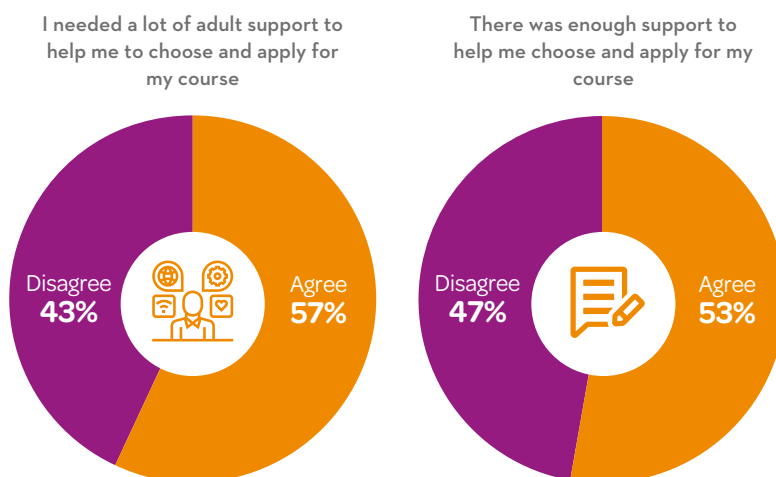
Adopted adult, aged 18-24

One adopted young person was glad to have found a small college for students with special needs as the local college was “too big with no support out of lessons.” However, others felt forced to enrol on courses that they would not have chosen, in colleges that they did not feel they could ever settle in.

“The college and social worker chose this course. I hated it and walked out after 4 hours and never went back.”

Adopted young person, aged under 18

The majority of respondents under 25 found it difficult to navigate the process of finding and applying for suitable courses and many did not feel that there was enough help available:



While some adopted and care-experienced young people can receive extra support from the careers services in their areas, if a range of appropriate post-16 options is not available, then, as Jack and his family discovered, the extra support does not make a real difference. Not only are the academic requirements out of reach for some young adopted and care-experienced people, but the impact of trauma and adverse childhood experiences can mean that choices of setting are also restricted by the young person’s ability to cope with the social, emotional and mental health pressures of post-16 education.

Ensuring that young people with a history of trauma and care-experience have an equal opportunity to further their education will mean not only providing courses and training with a range of entry levels, but also providing a variety of trauma-informed settings that are equipped and able to support young people effectively. The challenge of the transition from a smaller, more community-based school environment with a lot of adult support, to a large, impersonal college where young people are expected to be increasingly independent was too difficult to overcome for too many of the adopted adults who participated in this study.

In the end, Jack did have a positive experience of further education. A supportive relationship with his parents, and the high standard of communication between his college and his home were strong protective factors for him. However, none of this would have been possible without the willingness of Jack’s family to both find and fund his place at college.

Excellent quality post-16 provision for all young people should not be a postcode lottery, and neither should it depend on a family’s ability to pay. Any consideration of reform in post-16 education must fully consider those young people who, because of learning needs, social and emotional needs, mental health needs, care experience or the impact of adverse childhood experiences, have already experienced severe disadvantage in education, and recognise that providing suitable options will be more complex than simply adding more entry level courses to the prospectus. As they move into tertiary education these young people deserve better options than a choice between paying out or dropping out.

CASE STUDY: SARAH



Sarah did well at her all-girls grammar school and went on to complete both further and higher education. However, despite her academic achievements, she describes her time at school as “quite difficult” in some respects, and her transition to sixth form college as “terrifying”.

Between the ages of 14 and 21, most young people will sit some of the most important examinations of their lives and make decisions that will define their futures. For adopted young people, this is often also a time when they are coming to terms with their life history and complex backgrounds. Many undergo therapy, have reunions with birth family members, and experience significant internal conflicts as they move towards an independent future while coming to terms with the impact of their past.

In Sarah’s case, her time at sixth form college was also a time when she began to undergo therapy for issues related to her adoption. Her therapy took place each Monday afternoon, meaning that she had to miss lessons. She recalls, “I had to talk to my tutor to ask her if I could have Monday afternoons off in order to go to therapy, which was a very difficult thing to do. I never actually explained to anyone in my class why I wasn’t there. I just came up with a new excuse every week.”

As she underwent therapy, Sarah was also struggling to cope with the environment of college. She recalled an incident in her first week when a fight broke out in the dining hall: “I’d never seen anything like it before, except for things that had happened in early life that weren’t very nice, and I just froze and didn’t know what to do. It was absolutely terrifying.”

Sarah needed support, but it wasn’t forthcoming. She remembers, “They didn’t really tell us who to talk to if it wasn’t an academic problem, and academics weren’t too much of a problem for me. We never had a talk about where to go or whether there were college counsellors or something like that. It made me feel lonely and I guess that contributed to struggling to make friends.” Sarah’s struggles translated into a period where she started skipping lessons and “messing around”.

Although she went on to complete her college courses successfully and moved on to higher education, Sarah feels that her social and emotional needs were still relevant during her late teens and extra support is important to help adopted students to cope in the college environment, regardless of their level of academic achievement. “I think there’s a misconception that you’re kind of cured of being adopted when you’re adopted,” she says. “I did feel like I didn’t get everything I needed because I could do well academically which, looking back, is maybe why I started to rebel against the system because the only way to get support was maybe to start failing.”

Sarah’s Story: Coping with college life

There is no doubt that the college environment poses significant difficulties for some adopted young people, and support is still needed. Almost 30% of survey respondents who started a college course within one year of leaving school were unable to complete it. This is a huge and concerning drop-out rate.

More than half of the survey respondents of all ages did not feel confident about their academic ability while they were at college. Low self-esteem and lack of confidence in their ability to meet the academic standards had a detrimental effect, especially on those who had experienced failure at school.

More than

HALF



of all survey respondents said that they found the college environment overwhelming and even threatening

“I was so anxious about my exams I didn’t turn up so I failed my first year and decided to go to a sixth form college instead the following year.”

Adopted adult, aged 25-34

“I dropped out as it was all too much for me and my anxiety. I wasn’t completing the work.”

Adopted adult, aged 18-24

Coping with peer relationships and managing unstructured times were also challenges for many. 60% reported finding unstructured times particularly difficult, and 37% felt that they did not make friends or feel part of the college community. More than half felt that the college environment was overwhelming.

“College was too much to manage being hypervigilant. Couldn’t manage all the people and the social situation.”

Adopted adult, aged 18-24

One respondent, aged 18-24, said that they dropped out of college due to feeling isolated and having relationship difficulties with classmates, while another, aged under 18, simply said, “Didn’t feel safe.”

While more than 70% of survey respondents felt that their college teachers were supportive and approachable, respondents of all ages found that there was little understanding of the impact of being adopted on their ability to cope and to learn. Issues that had posed difficulties at school, such as triggers in the curriculum, continued to create challenges at college. The majority of survey respondents did not benefit from the provision of a mentor or key worker, or access counselling or wellbeing services while they were at college.

Some respondents expressed concerns about disclosing their adoptive status in order to receive additional support. Rebecca Best (2019) noted the impact of “inaccurate and stigmatising views of adoption” that could affect the way that adopted children are understood within education. The adopted young people she interviewed “had encountered discriminatory attitudes towards adoption within schools and the wider social context, which affected how they chose to present themselves to others.” Such attitudes no doubt had an impact on their willingness to disclose.

“I heard teachers make disparaging remarks about adoptees and people in care. As a result of this, I never ‘came out’ as a care-experienced adoptee.”

Adopted adult, aged 35-44

Rising awareness of the specific needs of adopted and care-experienced young people in education means that younger survey respondents are more likely to declare their status but, while 85% of survey respondents under 25 did declare their adoptive status at some point during their time at college or during the application stage, two thirds of those did not receive any additional help or support as a result of this.

For adopted young people, transitioning to college means leaving a school where they were known by most adults, and where their adoptive status was most likely also known, and moving to a larger, more impersonal environment where the protocols for declaring their adoptive status are unclear, and there is no guarantee of additional support if they do take this step. Some, like Sarah, were unsure about where to turn for support that was not related to academic progress, while others were reluctant to seek help because of how others might perceive them.

“I made poor decisions about what to do and where to go because I didn’t know who to ask and I was also too worried about asking because I thought people would think I was stupid.”

Adopted adult, aged 25-34

It is clear that not only should additional support be available for adopted young people throughout their time in further education, but also that this support should be pro-active, rather than relying on vulnerable young people to make their needs known. The very high drop-out rate for this cohort suggests that too many are not able to access the support that they need.

CASE STUDY: ANNA



Struggles with her mental health have been a challenge for Anna throughout her education. She missed a lot of time at secondary school, resulting in being dropped down a year, and felt that her mental health needs were not generally well understood. “The way I coped was to self-harm,” she recalls, “but at the school I was at, they said it was me misbehaving, that I was a drama queen, over-reacting, which wasn’t the right approach because I was crying out for help but the help wasn’t being given.”

Despite her difficulties, Anna was a keen student and was excited to go on to college but, having fallen behind in her education due to mental ill health, she needed extra help to find the right course. The family found the local authority SEN team extremely helpful. Anna’s mum, Marie, recalls, “The SEND manager came to the house and said to Anna, what would your golden ticket be? Anna said, to go to college. Within three days of that conversation they had organised it. Anna wanted to do childcare, so they arranged a level 1 childcare course with functional skills. They were really supportive.”

Anna’s first months at college were extremely positive. She remembers, “They supported me amazingly. I had meet and greet when I arrived, break support, lunch support, and support throughout the day, which really worked for me. I actually wanted to be there and I’ve never felt like that before.” Anna passed her first course, but then things started to get difficult.

Where Anna lives, young people are discharged from children and adolescent mental health services when they reach 16, but then Anna found that she didn’t meet the criteria to be accepted by adult mental health services, so her support began to reduce. At the same time, her therapy accessed through the Adoption Support Fund was coming to an end, and the college started talking about gradually reducing Anna’s support to help her to become more independent. After a crisis, Anna was admitted as an in-patient to a mental health unit, which effectively ended her college education.

Now Anna is out of education, although she is hoping to return. Her college, concerned about her mental health needs, is reluctant to allow her to begin her chosen course in childcare, and successive changes in mental health support workers have meant that it has been difficult to ensure that everybody is kept up to date on the progress Anna has made with her mental health. Although the college is working with the family to find a way to support Anna back into education, she is currently at home, receiving a small amount of tutoring.

Despite all of this, Anna is resolute. “I’m not going to let this stop me,” she says. “I’m determined to get my GCSEs still, and I’m desperate to go back to college. It’s not the course I wanted to do, but it’s still college, it’s better than nothing.”

Anna’s Story: The vital role of wellbeing and good mental health

Difficulties with mental health were common among survey respondents, with over two thirds having visited a health professional over concerns about their mental health. The CELCIS report, *Being a student with care experience is very daunting* (2019) noted that care-experienced students face a level of complexity in their personal lives which can negatively impact their ability to access and complete further education courses. The Adoption Barometer 2018 revealed that this is a time when many adopted young people re-connect with birth family members, sometimes for the first time since they were removed into care, and explore complex issues around their history and identity, right at the time when their educational journey reaches its most crucial stages.

Unfortunately, this is also the time when vulnerable young people can find mental health support particularly hard to access. Transition to adult mental health services can take place any time between the ages of 16 and 25, depending on where a young person lives, and the threshold for being accepted onto adult services is generally higher than that for children’s services. Too many are left without support just at the time when they might need it most.

TWO THIRDS

of all survey respondents said they had things going on in their lives which made it difficult for them to fully commit to their studies



Survey respondents were clear that their experiences and their adoption had an impact on their mental health and ability to cope socially and emotionally.

“Where others liked boys and drinking because it was normal, it was behaviour I engaged in to seek validation because I was insecure in my identity. It wasn’t usual teenage stuff.”

Adopted adult, aged 25-34

“I suffered with anxiety and ‘imposter syndrome’ during the later years of high school which affected my confidence greatly.”

Adopted adult, aged 25-34

“I can’t settle, make friends or keep friends unless they are not great ones and I don’t have any interests. I did well in primary school and I did okay until yr 8. I’m not sure I’ll ever complete a course ... Lots of people have tried to help me and like me but I give up very easily. Maybe one day I will do something.”

Adopted adult aged 18-24

When survey respondents were asked what helped them the most in terms of their social and emotional wellbeing, supportive relationships with key adults was the most common suggestion. Those who had experienced school more positively commented on the importance of their relationships with teachers and other staff who were committed to pro-actively supporting them. Where students were able to form positive relationships with college staff, it had a positive impact on their ability to reach the academic standards and complete their courses.

It is perhaps a challenge to create systems within which students can maintain supportive relationships with key adults in a large and busy post-16 provision. However, these relationships are particularly important as the college system expects young people to become increasingly independent and focuses much less than schools on encouraging parental involvement, while at the same time, young people like Anna may have aged out of other types of professional support.

For some, college life required too much independence too soon, and they were not ready to take this step. For example, almost two thirds of survey respondents of all ages reported that they found it difficult to organise themselves and work independently while at college.

“I was abandoned. Despite strong support from my parents. However, the college explicitly refused to talk to my parents and their offers of help and support. The college’s attitude was “We deal with the students, they are adults now and accountable in their own right” – and this simply translated into letting me sink. ”

Adopted adult, aged 18-24

“My mum and dad helped me a lot at school and at college. I always worked hard and did my best but I needed their help.”

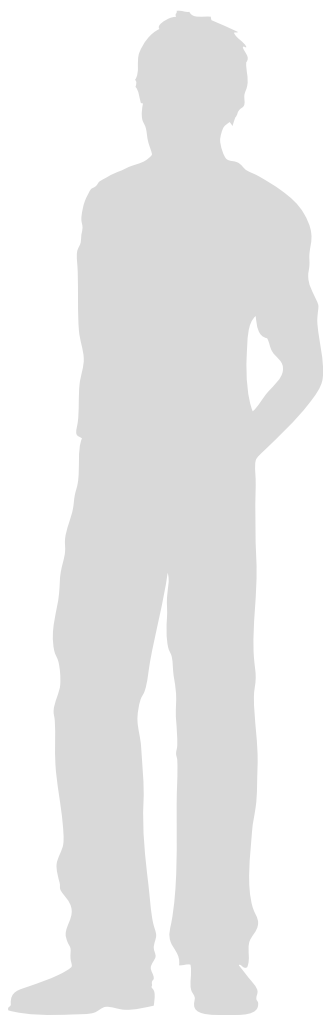
Adopted adult, aged 18-24

Peer relationships are also important to young people. We have already seen how the college environment can be overwhelming for some adopted young people. Even when they appear to be coping academically, problems with managing unstructured time and managing peer relationships can negatively impact their ability to cope. Both interviewees and survey respondents reflected on the negative impact of loneliness and difficult peer relationships, and over one third felt that they had not made friends while at college, or felt part of the college community.

Research by Brooks (2014) and Gutman & Vorhaus (2012) has demonstrated that young people with better health and wellbeing are more likely to achieve academically and be more engaged in their studies. The older children are, the more relevant their emotional wellbeing becomes in educational terms. The Government’s mental health strategy, *No health without mental health* (2011) defines wellbeing as “A positive state of mind and body, feeling safe and able to cope, with a sense of connection with people, communities and the wider environment.”

Relationships are a key factor in student wellbeing. Positive wellbeing is a key factor in academic attainment. Post-16 settings cannot afford to ignore the value of relationships between staff and students, between staff and parents, and between students and their peers if they seek to aim for the very best academic progress for all students.

CASE STUDY: ETHAN



Like most of the adopted young people featured in this report, Ethan had a difficult time at school. Diagnosed with severe dyscalculia, Ethan was unable to pass his Maths GCSE and, as a result, was refused entry to his school's sixth form. Although Ethan's parents disputed the school's policy as discriminatory, enlisting the help of Ethan's social worker and the independent education advisor, the school refused to adjust their policy, and Ethan was forced to leave his friends and his teachers behind and look for a suitable place at college.

At first, Ethan's dad, James, was confident that they would be able to find something suitable for Ethan from the many choices on offer locally. However, it soon became clear that Ethan was so discouraged by his school experiences that he was simply not in a position to take the huge step of enrolling on a course in a large, impersonal sixth form college where he knew nobody.

"I went for an induction day," recalls Ethan, "but I just found it too hard because I didn't know anyone there, so it was a massive change. At that time, I just thought I was done with education and just didn't really want to be involved in it anymore."

Unable to manage the transition, Ethan, like one third of our survey respondents, spent large parts of his late teens not in education, employment or training. His dad, James, reflected on how difficult those years were: "It's heartbreaking for all of us really. They were dark years. Ethan was very low for a while, very low. He was not good for a year or so."

However, several years later, Ethan has begun to feel that he might have another chance at continuing his education. Having become a dad, Ethan has been involved in a local mentoring scheme for young fathers where he has been supported as a parent and encouraged to consider his future. A mentor on the scheme helped Ethan to find and enrol on an introductory course in the construction industry which he was due to start just days after he participated in this interview.

Both Ethan and his dad feel positive about this new direction. "I'm actually really excited about starting," says Ethan, "because it's something that I actually want to do. I do want to try to go into that industry so I want to try quite hard."

After several difficult years, Ethan is now in a different place. Becoming a parent has made him think differently about his own experiences and what he now wants out of life, and he is ready to take a step that was out of his reach when he first left school.

Although the course he has enrolled on is at a very basic level, Ethan now believes that he will be able to complete it and go on to higher level courses in the construction industry.

"Being a dad has made me feel different, 'cos you actually have to get on and do stuff, and when you find something you want to do, you're going to be more excited and try."

Postscript: Some time after this interview, James informed us that Ethan did not manage to access the construction course after all. He is still uncertain about his next steps.

Ethan's Story: The importance of second chances

Returning to education later in life after a difficult earlier experience was not uncommon amongst those who responded to the survey. 38% of respondents enrolled in education or training more than one year after leaving school. Of these later enrollers, 81% were under 35 at the time they began the course, and more than half were in employment immediately before enrolling.

There are significant differences between the experiences of these later enrollers, when compared to those who enrolled immediately after completing school.

The later enrollers were more purposeful in their choice of course, with 42% choosing a course that would help them achieve their goals, compared to 34% of early enrollers, and a further 11% choosing a course that was directly related to a job they were already doing.

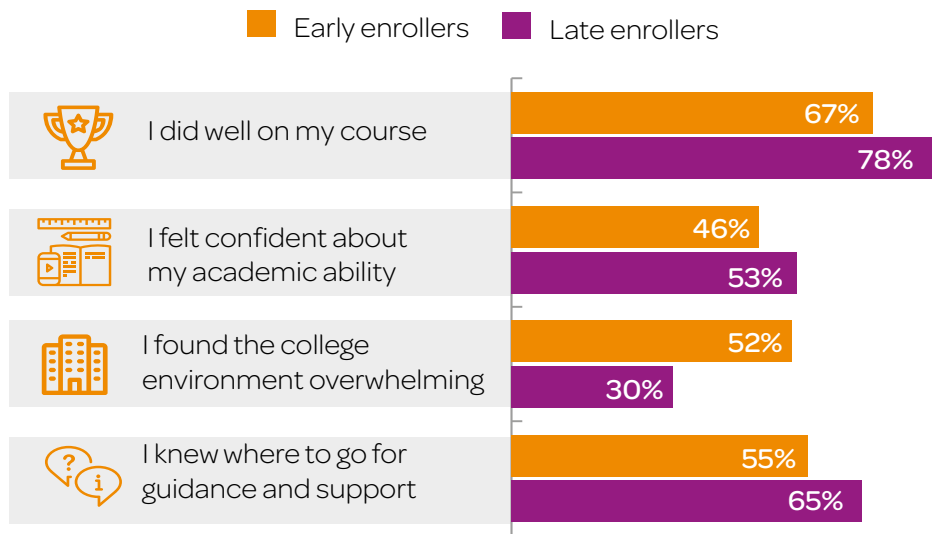
Respondents who enrolled in college more than one year after leaving school were significantly more likely to complete their course than early enrollers



For some, their choice of course came as a result of a re-evaluation of their goals following earlier setbacks.

I originally wanted to be a primary school teacher and had applied to university but as time passed I realised I was not ready to leave home. In the end my A Level results were not good enough for primary teaching, though I was offered a different course. My sister suggested working at the children’s nursery so I applied and now I’m enjoying it and doing an apprenticeship in childcare.
Adopted adult, aged 18-24

Later enrollers were much less likely to declare their care-experienced and adoptive status, with 61% of respondents never making this known. They were also less likely to access additional support such as mentors and counsellors. Despite this, their perceptions of their college experience were better than those who enrolled immediately after school. Late enrollers were generally more able to cope with the college environment, more confident in their abilities and more likely to be able to seek out the support they needed



The drop-out rate for early enrollers was almost 30%. For late enrollers, this was down to 18%. The majority of these late enrollers were still under 25 when they went back to college, but it seems that the little time that had passed did make a difference in terms of their ability to approach their studies more confidently and to complete them successfully.

“I feel more confident than previously and hope to complete one more year after this.”
Adopted adult, aged 18-24

However, positive experiences were not universal for late enrollers. For some, the legacy of their early struggles in education continued to follow them well into their adulthood, and 70% of late enrollers felt that they had things going on in their lives that made it hard for them to focus on their studies, compared to 66% of early enrollers.

“During the course I had to leave as I became a kinship carer for my newborn nephew.”
Adopted adult, aged 35-44

“The stress caused me to have a complete breakdown.”
Adopted adult aged 45-54

The older they became, the less likely respondents were to be open about their adoptive status, or to tell their college about their histories. While some were clear that this was their choice and felt like the right decision for them, others felt compelled to silence either because they believed that others would view it as irrelevant, or would judge them because of their adoptive status.

“There was zero support, full stop. I couldn’t tell them of my background. It didn’t seem relevant. I wouldn’t have had the courage to volunteer it. They gave me no opportunity to tell them. And I was given no advice that telling them might even be a helpful thing. So the downward spiral was repeated. I flunked. Yes, it was my fault. If you can’t conform, you’re out. That’s it.”

Adopted adult, aged 18-24

“I mainly kept my care experience and adoptive status private throughout my studies due to the predominantly middle-class students on all of my courses ... I wanted to avoid people’s prejudices and assumptions.”

Adopted adult, aged 35-44

While many of our respondents were able to go on to eventual academic success later in life – 81% of respondents over 25 had completed higher education – those who repeatedly tried and failed to access and complete further education courses were left bruised by the experience.

“The whole prospect of it is lonely and hostile. There is pressure exerted by yourself and by others. And for me, that just made me deny the problem. I have just repeated mistakes which first arose in sixth form ever since.”

Adopted adult, aged 18-24

For some, returning to education slightly later in life can lead to positive outcomes, as they find themselves better placed to access support, and more confident in their own abilities and relationships. However, the impact of care experience and adoption is lifelong, and support should be extended to those who return to education later in life so that they are given the best chance to succeed.

CASE STUDY: RACHEL

As Rachel approached the end of her time at secondary school, she faced a dilemma. Rachel was academically able and often scored high marks on her coursework, but she struggled with peer relationships and only received a diagnosis of severe dyslexia late in her education. After all of her struggles, she was not enthusiastic about the possibility of going on to college.

She recalls, "Really and truly I didn't want to go into education after finishing school, but you have to by law or your parents can get fined." Unsure of her future plans, but feeling forced to choose something, Rachel decided to focus on the only subject she had really enjoyed at school, English Literature. However, all the colleges required her to study other subjects alongside it so, in her words, "that went out of the window. You want me to go into education, but you're not making it easy for me!"

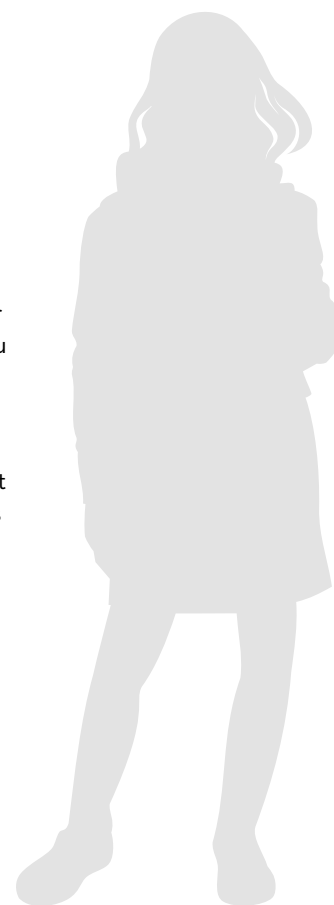
In the months that followed, Rachel attempted a number of different college courses, none of which were linked to any particular career aspirations. She tried a taster day for a Music course and enrolled on a Business course. At both colleges Rachel found it extremely difficult to settle into the busy environment filled with boisterous teenagers whose attitudes and behaviour she found triggering.

She recalls, "Everywhere I went, I was always the youngest, so when I went to college I was just turned 16 and everyone else was 18, 19, 20. It was horrible. I find it hard to concentrate. When I already have so many thoughts in my own head, and then I'm hearing everybody else I can't concentrate."

Hoping to find something that would engage Rachel, her mum, Helen, supported her to enrol in a beauty college, learning make-up for stage and screen. However, Rachel was reluctant at first. She recalls, "When I enrolled in this college, I had had enough really. It still felt like school. I was very poorly-behaved, walking out of class, coming home, being rude. I'm actually friends with my teacher now but back then I was acting out a lot."

Rachel did manage to complete the course, earning a merit, and then went on to do a digital marketing apprenticeship but, throughout her experience of further education, all she really wanted was to start working.

At the time of her interview for this report, Rachel had been working for three years, as well as successfully completing an animal psychology course online. She is now starting to feel more positive about her future: "I'm still working, doing office admin at the moment, and I've got a taster day for creative non-fiction writing soon because I want to write my life story. Although I have my issues, if it's something I love and enjoy I can stay focused and get it done."



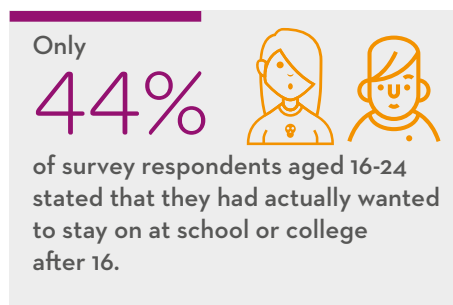
Rachel's Story: A different trajectory

Rachel's story encapsulates the crux of the difficulties faced by many adopted and care-experienced young people: their lives and experiences simply do not fit into the 'usual' moulds.

Our education system tends to assume a smooth trajectory from primary to secondary school, from school to further education and training, and from there on to work or higher education. However, young people who have been removed from their birth families and then spent time in care before achieving permanence in a new family, have lived their lives on a completely different trajectory.

Rachel is a highly motivated and able young person, yet she was not able to settle in college, or find a course that was a good fit for her. Far from being the foundation for future work or study, her college experience was simply a costly exercise in killing time until she could go out into the world of work. In fact, there was a sense among both interviewees and survey respondents that many were choosing further education settings and courses that were expedient rather than related to a clear pathway to achieving their education or career ambitions.

Adopted young people are perhaps not alone in being unclear about their future goals at the age of 16 - only 34% of survey respondents under 25 chose their college course because it would help them achieve their specific goals - but for those with care experience, choosing and training for a future career can be the least of their concerns. We



have already seen how poor school experiences, mental health challenges, and the process of coming to terms with their history and their status as an adopted person can mean that some adopted young people are neither ready nor able to focus on education at 16+.

In fact, only 44% of survey respondents aged 16-24 stated that they had actually wanted to stay on at school or college after 16, and only one in five had aspirations to go on to higher education. When we consider that over 80% of respondents over 25 had completed higher education, and almost three quarters were in employment at the time of taking the survey, it is clear that adopted people can and do achieve both in education and work, but that their route to success may be more circuitous and take longer.

The case for universal education and training for all young people aged 16-18 can only be made on the basis that there is enough flexibility and variety in the options available to ensure that all young people can be effectively included, and recognises the unique challenges faced by adopted and care-experienced students. Developmental delays and special educational needs may mean that some need significant academic support. For others, social, emotional and mental health support will be necessary if they are to even begin their further education, and will need to be maintained in order to ensure that they are able to complete it.

However, while all UK governments recognise that some cohorts of children will need additional support, children who have left care as a result of adoption or another permanence order are often invisible when programmes of support are being put in place.

For instance, in England, a £19 million support settlement was introduced in October 2019, including the formation of the Care Leaver Covenant Board. As part of this, Pupil Premium Plus has been extended to include care leavers aged 16-18, but this did not encompass adopted children, even though they benefit from this funding while in school. In Wales, care leavers can have priority access to additional funding, but adopted young people are not included. Only in Scotland is the commonality of needs of all care-experienced young people, including adopted young people, acknowledged in the Skills Development Scotland Corporate Parenting Plan.

Governments in all nations must take responsibility for recognising the specific needs of this cohort of young people and ensuring that they do not fall through the cracks once they leave school. Reasonable adjustments need to be made at all stages of further education, from enrolment onwards, through studying, work placements, assessments and examinations. Care-experienced and adopted young people need to be able to choose the setting that can best cater for their social, emotional and mental health needs, whether that is a school sixth form, a college, or a smaller specialist setting. For some, completing online courses may help them to succeed in education unhindered by the anxiety of accessing unfamiliar settings.

However, even with support, some adopted young people may not be ready to access education effectively at 16. In these cases, it may be more appropriate to provide supported opportunities to work, with the possibility of returning to education or training later. For young people who have struggled and perhaps failed at school, a further two years of struggling through further education may be enough to put them off learning for the rest of their lives. It is surely better to delay further education than to abandon it entirely. The lower dropout rate for later enrollers in the survey demonstrates that for some, a later start means a more successful outcome, if they are properly supported.

WHAT WORKS FOR ADOPTED STUDENTS?

The adopted adults who were interviewed or surveyed for this report were able to share a wealth of experience about what had worked to support them through both school and further education – and plenty of opinions on what had not worked.

Successful support strategies ranged from those more closely related to specific learning needs or disabilities, such as extra time in exams and 1-1 support, to targeted help in finding and applying for suitable courses, and the provision of counsellors, mentors and key adults during their time at college.

While the specifics of effective support depended largely on the particular needs of the individual, strong themes emerged around the general principles that should underpin the way care-experienced and adopted young people are supported throughout education, and especially in further education.

Effective support:

- is rooted in relationships
- is pro-active
- is informed by expertise
- invests in wellbeing and mental health
- is life-long

Support should be rooted in relationships

Again and again, adopted young people and adults commented on the importance of the relationships they formed with adults throughout their education, both positive and negative. A brilliant support worker, or an understanding tutor had the potential to keep a struggling young person engaged in their studies and see them through to the end. For those who felt they had nobody to turn to, college could be a disorientating and frightening place.

“The tutors really helped me to get through and pass the course even when I was very anxious.”

Adopted adult, aged 18-24

When survey respondents were asked to describe what would be most helpful in their own words, the most frequently repeated answer was some variation of mentors, counsellors or key adults. Our interviewee, Sarah, described the lack of this kind of support as an important factor in how difficult she found it to settle in at college, despite finding the academic work well within her capabilities.

The transition from school to college is a difficult time for any young person. They are usually moving from a smaller environment where they have spent several years among teachers and classmates who have got to know each other quite well, to a larger, more impersonal setting, filled with strangers, and the added pressure of higher expectations around their ability to be independent.

For many of the adopted people who participated in this study, this was compounded by complex personal and emotional situations relating to their adoptive status, the negative impact of years of struggle at school, and a range of social and learning challenges which left them unprepared for the new environment. As a result, care-experienced and adopted young people are likely to need more support to make the transition, and throughout their time at college, both from college staff and from their parents or guardians.

The most effective support will be rooted in strong, supportive relationships between key members of staff and the young person, and will also recognise the value and necessity of parental support, seeking to promote effective communication between home and college, rather than view students as fully independent learners.

Support should be pro-active

Even where support is made available, there can be barriers that prevent adopted young people from asking for it. Declaring your status is not a decision that is taken lightly. It involves sharing very personal information and can leave students feeling vulnerable about how that information will be handled.

While some of the 36% of early enrollers and 61% of late enrollers who did not declare their status felt that this was the right decision for them, others withheld the information because of concerns that it would be seen as irrelevant or would cause others to pre-judge them. Some did not realise that disclosing would bring them any benefits. Even where students had disclosed their status, it was not always easy for them to take the first step of asking for support. Several survey respondents reported initially refusing offers of support, despite struggling.

“[Support] was offered but I didn’t feel I could take it up.”

Adopted adult, aged 25-34

“I was told to use the learning support centre but I did not want to as I do not want the label and their help was no good anyway. I just didn’t manage.”

Adopted adult, aged 18-24

The impact of early trauma and adverse experiences can result in the development of survival strategies in young children based around minimising need, becoming invisible, and appearing compliant, that last into adulthood. It can be difficult for even adults in this situation to trust others enough to reach out for help.

“I believe it would have helped if I had had a mentor who checked in on me, not waiting for me to go to them with a problem. They might have dealt with the problems earlier. My parents were supportive but they felt awkward interfering in the work placement.”

Adopted young person, aged under 18

Our interviewee, Amy, managed to complete five years of secondary school, leaving with no qualifications and a range of undiagnosed disabilities, mainly because she became expert in masking her difficulties, hiding, and keeping her head down. It is hard to imagine a young person in Amy’s situation taking the first step of asking an adult – a stranger – for help, or even accepting help that is offered, in an environment where the drive towards promoting increasing independence is strong.

Best (2019) found that adopted children’s “experiences of being ‘let down’ by their birth parents had jeopardised their ability to trust others,” and stressed the importance of providing opportunities for adopted young people to develop their ability to trust through relationships with consistent and responsive adults. Where children and young people are disadvantaged by early experiences, it is adults who must take the lead in ensuring that these nurturing relationships can be established.

If colleges and further education settings include an opportunity to declare care experience as part of their admissions paperwork, alongside information about the nature of support available to care-experienced and adopted students, it may encourage applicants to disclose. This then needs to be followed up pro-actively by designated support services in the college before the student begins their course, and regularly throughout the student’s time at college. It should not be left to a vulnerable student to assess and ask for their support needs.

Support should be informed by expertise

The need for effective training and better awareness of the issues among education staff came across strongly when survey respondents were asked what would have helped them in education. This was seen as important both for staff specifically tasked with providing targeted support for adopted students, and for all student-facing staff members more generally.

“Support staff trained in trauma to help people.”

Adopted adult, aged 45-54

“I think overall a better understanding of the generals of adoption and the impact it can have on a person probably for ever and not to think once adopted it all goes away.”

Adopted young person, aged under 18

One respondent highlighted that an adopted person’s understanding of their own experience can change over time and that, as a young student, they may not fully grasp the impact of their adverse experiences.

“For all educators to be trained around the impact of early trauma would significantly help. I have only understood the impact of this on me as I have studied relevant information while in my current role and while adopting myself. I had previously thought some of my difficulties were just me rather than based in early trauma.”

Adopted adult, aged 45-54

While it is not appropriate for education staff to take on the role of counsellor, infer an individual's needs based on their care-experienced status alone, or assume that the student does not know how they feel about their own situation, it is appropriate to ensure that education settings, policies, and support systems for all students are attachment and trauma-informed. Such approaches will harm no student and will provide a secure safety net for those who may be impacted by adverse early life experiences, whether or not they are ready or able to quantify or articulate those impacts.

Support should invest in wellbeing and mental health

Adoption UK's *Bridging the Gap* report highlighted the virtuous circle of wellbeing and attainment. Children and young people with better wellbeing are more likely to achieve academically and be more engaged with learning. The older children are, the more relevant their social and emotional wellbeing becomes. When a child's wellbeing is supported, their attainment improves. Improved attainment leads to a greater sense of emotional wellbeing which positively impacts on future attainment, and so the virtuous circle goes on.

However, children who have encountered adverse early experiences and who are care-experienced are more likely than others to experience social, emotional and mental health difficulties, including difficulties forming relationships, managing social situations and coping with strong feelings. For these young people, poor social and emotional wellbeing can impact negatively on attainment, leading to a vicious circle of low attainment and a subsequent increase in social and emotional difficulties.

All schools and colleges want their students to succeed academically. Supporting student wellbeing is integral to supporting academic achievement. Even for our interviewee, Sarah, who was a high achiever academically, difficulties in her personal life impacted on her studies. She remembers, “I think a lot happened at home and a lot happened in my personal life those two years, which made studying really hard, even though I found the content easy ... I went through a phase of skipping lessons and, you know, not going to stuff and basically just messing around.” In the end, it was Sarah's own drive to achieve that motivated her to turn her situation around, but if she didn't have that foundation of previous academic success to motivate her, things might have been very different.

When the support offer in education is concerned mainly with academic attainment, then both struggling and higher-achieving students may miss out on essential support for their social, emotional and mental health needs that might be the key to maintaining or raising their attainment. Further education settings cannot afford to ignore the crucial role that wellbeing plays in attainment. The best support will cater to the whole person, and not merely the narrow demands of academic progress.

Support should be lifelong

Nearly 40% of survey respondents came back to further education more than one year after leaving school, and more than one third of those were aged 25 or older when they enrolled. Education is a lifelong journey, and care experience is a lifelong experience.

One survey respondent, who was aged 35-44 at the time of enrolling on their course, described having a “complete breakdown” due to stress. It is clear that, for some care-experienced and adopted people, additional support may well be needed long after they have ceased to be a ‘child’ and have become ineligible for statutory support services offered to younger students.

“[There should be] an understanding that adopted and looked after children may need several attempts to complete their education, going on into adult life, so should have access to continued funding.”

Adopted adult, aged 24-34

It is not unusual for people to come back to education later in life. According to the Association of Colleges, there were over one million college students aged 25+ in England alone during 2016/17.

In the CELCIS report, *Being a student with care experience is very daunting*, which captured the views of over 400 care-experienced students in Scottish universities and colleges, students aged over 25 noted that, while they were no longer eligible for formal supports, they still experienced complex challenges relating to their care experience. Students “felt strongly that access to supportive services should be consistent, enduring and without discrimination on the basis of age, type of care experience or study setting.”

Adopted young people face unique challenges that can make it particularly difficult for them to make the most of education during their teenage years. Many will come back to education later in life and will be better placed to succeed. However, the impact of their care experience and early lives may still be significant, and support should reflect both the lifelong journey of education and the lifelong impact of being care-experienced.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Lay strong foundations in schools

- All UK governments to make significant changes to primary and secondary education in line with the recommendations outlined in *Bridging the Gap*: closing gaps in empathy, understanding, resourcing and, subsequently, attainment. Getting it right in further education means getting it right in schools first.

Provide realistic post-16 options for all young people

- Enhanced careers support offered to all care-experienced and adopted school leavers as a matter of course. Skills Development Scotland already recognises this cohort as a group requiring additional support. The rest of the UK must follow suit.
- Further education settings should be required to draw up an enhanced transition and induction plan for care-experienced and adopted students who are enrolling. This should include liaison with local secondary schools, with settings where work-based placements may take place, and with parents/guardians/carers as appropriate.
- All UK governments to carry out a review of the availability of suitable further education settings for students with special educational needs and disabilities, or additional learning needs, and for those with social, emotional and mental health difficulties, for whom large mainstream colleges are often inaccessible, with the aim of increasing the variety and suitability of provision in all areas.
- An increase in the provision of supported work-based options at post-16 for those for whom further academic study, or enrolment at college is not a suitable option. The Government could lead the way by extending their care leavers paid internship scheme to include all care-experienced and adopted young people.

Support all students to have an equal chance in post-16 education

- Training in the impact of trauma, attachment, care-experience and adoption should be made mandatory in all further education settings, for all staff members. As routes into teaching in further education are varied, it is vital that this training forms part of the setting's programme of CPD for all staff.
- Every further education setting to appoint a designated member of staff to oversee the academic progress, and social and emotional wellbeing of all care-experienced and adopted students, similar to the role of designated teachers in English primary and secondary schools. The holder of this post will liaise with teaching and pastoral staff in the setting, with the students and their parents/guardians/carers, with work-based placements, and with external agencies as appropriate.
- Extend the support already available for care leavers to include all care-experienced and adopted students. This process has already begun in Scotland.
- Extend the support aimed at care-experienced and adopted young people in education up to the age of 18, e.g. Pupil Premium Plus funding and the input of the virtual school in England. This is particularly imperative in nations where education and training is now compulsory from 16-18.
- Financial support available to students under 25 to be extended to at least 30 for care-experienced and adopted students, to reflect the frequency with which this cohort access education later in life, while still having additional support needs.

Use quality data to drive continual improvement

- Every further education setting to include an option for applicants of any age to declare their care-experienced or adoptive status. The name and contact details of the designated member of staff with responsibility for this cohort of students should also be included on this form so that students who choose not to declare have this information if they change their minds later.
- All UK governments to collect data on the enrolment, attainment and drop-out rate of care-experienced and adopted students in further education, based on self-declaration. This data should be used to inform future policy directions.

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Our vision is a world where all children and young people unable to live with their birth parents can find security and happiness with permanent families who have the right support to build brighter futures.

We provide our members with the highest level of service, support and education.

We campaign with you for positive change in the lives of adoptive families across the UK.

Adoption UK Helpline

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For details on any of our policies on confidentiality, data protection, child and vulnerable adult protection, equal opportunities and complaints procedures, please contact any of our offices.

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