

Why care leavers have no safety net when they graduate from university

August 17 2024, by Zoe Baker



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People who have spent time in state care as children are [far less likely](#) to go to university than their peers who have not been in care.

[Research has shown](#) that the often disruptive impact of being in the [care system](#) can have a negative impact on education, such as when children are regularly moved to different homes and schools.

Low educational expectations from caregivers and professionals also mean that children and [young people](#) in care might miss out on encouragement, advice, and guidance on applying to university. Care leavers may also prioritize entering work to become self-sufficient as early as possible.

There are care leavers, though, who overcome the odds, go to university and get a degree. [My research](#) with 23 care leavers explored their experiences before and after graduation.

While being awarded a degree leads to a number of benefits for graduates, including [higher earnings](#) and a lower chance of [unemployment](#), I found that care leavers experienced instability and restricted opportunities after graduation.

Without financial [support](#) from parents, care leavers at university are often provided with bursaries from their university and [local authorities](#) during their studies to help with living costs.

Many universities now provide additional support with student accommodation for care leavers too, allowing them to remain in their accommodation throughout the whole year if they do not have a [family home](#) to return to during holidays.

The support cliff-edge

This support from universities, though, falls away at graduation. My research showed that there was also a lack of consistency in whether [financial support](#) from local authorities continued after graduation.

This leaves care leavers in a precarious position as, unlike many other graduates, they are unlikely to be able to return to live in the family home after graduation.

This return home is called a "[boomerang transition](#)". Moments like this provide time and psychological space for graduates to decide on and take their next steps into graduate life, whether this is finding a job or going on to further study. Boomerang transitions can also provide a sense of safety if things go wrong in the early stages of graduate life, if a new job or postgraduate degree course doesn't work out.

The absence of this option for care leavers, coupled with the loss of university and local authority support, means that they find themselves facing more risks when graduating. One care leaver said,

"They [other graduates] might start something and it's terribly wrong but they can go home to their parents... with me it's like, no, I can't just try something and it fail; if it fails then like that's my life, that's my home, like there's that risk."

For many of the care leavers I spoke to, the months leading up to graduation were filled with worry.

Restricted opportunities

With no family home available to undergo a boomerang transition, care leavers lack pressure-free time and space to consider and find graduate-level work. This also means that care leavers may need to quickly accept a job to meet their basic living costs urgently after graduating, even if this doesn't align with their degree qualifications and desired career plans.

Even where a graduate's housing situation is stable, the sharp end to

support restricts their opportunities to build a graduate life in line with their long-term personal and career goals. This includes the option to continue studying, because additional financial help for postgraduate study is often not provided to care leavers by universities and local authorities. One student said,

"All my lecturers that I've spoken to have all said 'yeah, you should go off and do your master's.' But the thing is, yeah, I would love to do that, but would I be able to even afford to live if I was to go off and do a master's, which is really sad."

Even when care leavers "beat the odds" and obtain a degree, they find themselves standing at a cliff edge. Not having a family home to turn to, coupled with the falling away of local authority and university support, means that they miss out on opportunities that would be accessible to other graduates. This means they are less likely to be able to access the opportunities that a degree affords many members of the general population after leaving university.

Removing this cliff edge will provide the security and stability that care leaver graduates need. My research found that support, such as graduate bursaries provided by universities or short-term local authority [financial help](#) after graduation, gave care leavers the breathing room that a boomerang transition provides for non-care leaver graduates. It allows them pressure-free time to find work that is compatible with their degree qualifications and career interests. However, I also found that this support was only offered to a small number of graduates as it depended on which university they had attended, and which local authority they were in.

It is therefore possible to remove, or at the very least, reduce the severity of the cliff edge with the right support. Yet, this needs to be provided on a broader scale to ensure that all care leaver [graduates](#) can benefit from

their degrees even in the absence of a family home.

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Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Why care leavers have no safety net when they graduate from university (2024, August 17) retrieved 17 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-08-leavers-safety-net-university.html>

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