ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF THE BUTTLE UK QUALITY MARK IN HIGHER EDUCATION
Acknowledgements

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Disclaimer

This research and report has been undertaken and written by York Consulting LLP. Views expressed in this report are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of Buttle UK.

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In 2000, Buttle UK embarked upon a five-year action research study to explore the experiences of care leavers at university. We were supporting some young care leavers through our student grants programme and wanted to find out more about why so few were reaching and succeeding in higher education. Out of the recommendations of the study ‘By Degrees: From Care to University’ came the Quality Mark, which has been awarded to universities championing the needs of care leavers since 2006. Little did we think that seven years on we would see such a dramatic change in awareness of the barriers that care leavers face and the provision in place for them within the higher education sector. We are delighted to have been able to build and maintain the momentum for this invaluable work, which has taken place alongside the main thrust of our work which is grant giving.

We have had phenomenal support from all four governments and professional umbrella organisations across the UK. The access and widening participation agenda that has developed in all four nations and the resulting support we have received from national agencies, has been instrumental in facilitating the growth of the Quality Mark in both the HE and FE sector. In combination with such valuable strategic support, it has been an absolute privilege to work with practitioners within the higher education sector, who demonstrate such passion and enthusiasm for this agenda, carrying it from strength to strength. Remarkable policies and practices have been put in place within these institutions and it has advanced the agenda more than I ever imagined.

Nevertheless, there is still a lot more to be done to ensure care leavers’ needs are kept on the agenda. This report highlights the difference in support from the institutions that we, at Buttle UK, rate on renewal at ‘minimum’ compared to ‘exemplary’; therefore, institutions must continue to share and develop best practice so that all meet the ‘exemplary’ standard. Now that the Quality Mark is available to the further education sector, partnership working between colleges and universities will be vital to ensuring fluidity in care leavers’ transitions post-16. This can only be achieved through the support of local authorities and Health and Social Care Trusts, which must have an identified position open to communication with Quality Mark colleges and universities.

Student engagement is key to the continued success of this work and there is still work to do to ensure looked after children and care leavers are aware of the support on offer and understand what the Quality Mark means, so that they are in a position to ask for support when they need it. I would like to see specialist voluntary organisations for looked after children and care leavers continuing to work with us in raising awareness about the barriers these students encounter and in moving the agenda forward. As the commitment becomes increasingly embedded within the further and higher education sector, we will be looking to the UK governments and umbrella organisations to take over the monitoring of support for this specific cohort through their funding conditionality arrangements.

It is vital that the further and higher education sectors support each other to ensure we do not give up on these young adults.
The development of the Buttle UK Quality Mark since 2000 has been one of the key success stories for children leaving care. The initial five year action research programme “By Degrees: From Care to University” explored the experiences of the small minority of care leavers who continued into higher education. Out of this research, the Quality Mark was developed and it has made significant progress in ensuring that educational establishments understand the issues faced by children from care and how they can best support this group through their educational careers. However, there is still work to be done. Expanding the coverage of the Quality Mark is a big part of the picture. We need to make sure that all children in care know which institutions offer support that is tailored specifically to their needs. We need to help local authorities fulfil their obligation, as corporate parents, to encourage educational ambition. We need to ensure that the existing holders of the Quality Mark offer an exemplary service to this vulnerable group.

The KPMG Foundation is dedicated to improving the outcomes for children in care and it has been a pleasure to work with Buttle UK over the last 13 years. It would be our wish that the recommendations made in this report are given serious consideration so as to further improve educational aspiration and educational achievement for children leaving care.
Introduction

1. Statistics show that the number of students coming in to Higher Education (HE) from a care background remains extremely low across the UK. For example in 2011 in England the figures suggest that 6% of care leavers at the age of 19 were in HE and in Scotland, the rate is lower at just 2%. Comparable figures for these two countries show participation rates in HE among all 19 year olds to be much higher at 33% and 42% respectively.

2. In 2000 Buttle UK commissioned research to understand the barriers experienced by care leavers going into HE. These included issues with financial independence, accommodation and personal support needs. The findings of this research informed Buttle UK’s design of the key elements of the Buttle UK Quality Mark (BQM) framework. The BQM has been available since 2006.

3. In September 2012, Buttle UK commissioned York Consulting to undertake an evaluation of the impact of the BQM in HE. The BQM is awarded to institutions that can demonstrate that they are developing a robust institution-wide approach to support students coming to university from a care background.

Method

4. The research involved a sample of 28 institutions including 25 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and three Further Education (FE) colleges with HE provision. The sample included telephone consultations with 15 HEIs that have the BQM, 3 FE colleges (with HE provision) that have the BQM, two non-BQM HEIs and four undergoing BQM accreditation. In addition, case studies of four universities graded as providing exemplary levels of support were visited to gain a more in-depth understanding of the impact of the BQM. Staff operating across a range of functions were interviewed, including senior management, widening participation and student services, along with a review of documentation provided to Buttle UK to support the BQM accreditation and renewal. An online survey of care leavers currently studying in institutions with the BQM was undertaken which generated 279 responses, providing good quantitative and qualitative data. This was enhanced by an online focus group and face-to-face interviews with four students previously in care.

Key Findings

Support for the Buttle UK Quality Mark

5. In 2005, Buttle UK’s research revealed that before the start of the BQM, only one university in the UK had a comprehensive policy on care leavers. That situation is clearly now much changed with 56% of the total number of HEIs (not including FE Colleges providing HE) currently holding the BQM. This includes 17 out of the 24 Russell Group universities.

6. Buttle UK reports strong links and support from all key strategic bodies in each of the four nations. There is strong political support for the BQM in all four nations, particularly in Wales where this support is reflected in take-up of the BQM: 100% of HEIs in Wales are accredited with the BQM.

Impact of the BQM on Student Care Leavers

7. A survey was completed by 279 students who had previously been in care, providing robust data to draw conclusions regarding support to care leavers. 68% of respondents were female, 32% male; 84% were aged 24 or below. 16% were 25 or over, representing a significant minority of mature students. 60% of the students responding had been at university for over a year.

8. Students were asked about what information influenced them in their choice of university: 41% stated they were influenced by the BQM, only one university in the UK had a comprehensive policy on care leavers. That situation is clearly now much changed with 56% of the total number of HEIs (not including FE Colleges providing HE) currently holding the BQM. This includes 17 out of the 24 Russell Group universities.

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10. A survey was completed by 279 students who had previously been in care, providing robust data to draw conclusions regarding support to care leavers. 68% of respondents were female, 32% male; 84% were aged 24 or below. 16% were 25 or over, representing a significant minority of mature students. 60% of the students responding had been at university for over a year.

1. This relates to Care Leavers aged 19 years old as at 31st March 2011. These are Department for Education Statistics: ‘Children looked after by local authorities in England, including adoption’.  http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/statistics/ a0031/children-looked-after-leavingengland
Awareness of the BQM was not a key factor influencing the decision of students and some staff consulted suggested that awareness of the BQM among students needed to improve.

9. Many students previously in care stated how important advice and support was to them when applying for a place in HE and the importance of relevant information should not be underestimated:

“When I first started talking about applying to go to university with my personal advisor, I felt really daunted by it all. I never thought it was something I could do.”

(Student previously in care).

10. However, 41% stated they did not receive any information regarding support for care leavers, suggesting communicating available support to applicants needs to improve.

11. Once at university, the designated lead that universities appointed (a requirement of the BQM) made a difference to the quality of support experienced by students. Many students expressed appreciation of the support they received from key staff demonstrating the value of dedicated one-to-one support.

“They have supported me through finance, helping with paying off my debts… getting me into work as a student ambassador; just being there and listening and always making me feel reassured.”

(Student previously in care referring to key staff).

12. Just less than a third of all students receiving support (n = 48) stated they would not have been able to continue at university without it.

13. However, many students reported gaps in support both at university and from local authorities. Over a third of all students (37%) had not received any support from staff at university and 28% (n=28) of these were mature students (aged 25 or over). Mature students who had received support reported that it was important to them and, for a few, they would not have continued university without the financial support.

“I felt like giving up on university, she assisted me with the issues I was having and I changed my mind.”

(Student previously in care referring to key staff).
What Impact Has This Support Had On You Studying At The University?

- I would not have been able to continue at university
- It has made my time at university much easier than it would have been
- It has made no difference

14. Over a third of all students (37%) stated they were no longer in contact with anyone from their local authority and many would have liked more support from their local authority.

“…I wanted a one-to-one before starting the course, face to face help and support when issues arose. It would have been nice to have someone who knew the system.”

(Student previously in care).

15. An interview with one student previously in care revealed how advice from social workers in particular was sometimes partial and inappropriate. There was a general consensus among HE staff working in student support that many professionals in the care sector did not understand support offered in the HE sector for care leavers.

“I wanted a one-to-one before starting the course, face to face help and support when issues arose. It would have been nice to have someone who knew the system.”

(Student previously in care).

Impact on HEIs’ Support to Students Previously in Care

16. Buttle UK promotes the BQM as a way for institutions to demonstrate their support to care leavers. However, evidence from this research shows that the BQM provides more than an emblem of universities’ commitment: it encourages a whole-institution approach, offering practical ways of monitoring, reviewing and improving support to care leavers. Without this, many institutions would be unaware of the number of care leavers starting and leaving their establishment.

17. Gaining the BQM requires evidence that the Vice Chancellor or Pro-Vice Chancellor is committed to supporting care leavers as a dedicated group and this secures resources and budgets for staff working in student support and outreach.

“…Buttle asks the question, ‘are you committed?’ Once we get that commitment (from senior management) it opens doors for us. Without it, we would really struggle to do half of what we are doing now.”

(Head of Student Support Services).

18. By requiring institutions to provide a dedicated coordinator for care leavers, the BQM also ensures that support to students is easier for them to access and better tailored to their needs. Some staff stated that the development of the Outline Project Plan for the BQM was the start of a much needed process:
Staff undertaking the designated coordinator role reported carrying out high levels of advocacy for students previously in care on issues relating to students’ finances and accommodation, as well as liaising with local authorities regarding bursaries and other personal matters. The impact of this support on students’ experiences at university was clearly expressed in the survey and in one-to-one interviews.

Evidence from the research revealed varying levels of support from across the universities for students previously in care. Universities judged as providing exemplary support constantly reviewed their provision. Therefore, universities with the BQM who are not currently delivering exemplary levels of support could be challenged and supported to improve their support to ensure it is firmly embedded in the culture of the institution.

Impact on Partnership Working

A dedicated member of staff responsible for coordinating support facilitates effective partnership working between other institutions (HE and FE) and professionals working with looked after children. The need to provide coordinated support was very clearly expressed many times by staff and students:

“Students coming from care have such a unique set of circumstances that some simply wouldn’t get to or stay in university if we didn’t work together on their behalf.”

(The Care Leavers Project Coordinator).

Partnership work between HEIs and FE colleges was very much evident and in some areas the BQM was credited with stimulating this activity; universities reported working together to share ideas on developing practice as a result of the BQM process, particularly in the early stages.

There were examples of strong partnerships continuing where Aim Higher had once existed: staff from Looked After Children teams and Connexions meeting to develop pathways of support with local HEIs and FE colleges. However, the picture of joint working with local authorities/Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts seems to vary considerably across the UK, with many universities reporting longstanding barriers to effective partnership development:

“Our services are not joined up. Advice and Counselling, Housing… we don’t know how many students from care we’ve got as we don’t track and departments don’t know how to find out. This is the beginning of a much needed process.”

(Head of Outreach and Widening Participation).
“Some local authorities are really easy to engage with, and understand what we’re trying to do, and others seem impenetrable. No matter how much we try to get links with (local authority name), it just seems to fall on deaf ears.”

(Head of Student Support Services).

25. Students corroborated high levels of variation in both financial and personal support coming from local authorities. Buttle UK has previously described a “postcode lottery” in availability of support for care leavers in HE and this research confirms this.

26. HEIs endeavour to respond to all needs of students previously in care, but this is sometimes time consuming and they have asked that this report requests that more emphasis be put on local authorities and HSC Trusts to review their support of students and their levels of joint working with HEIs.

Impact on Further Education Colleges

27. The study only included three consultations with FE colleges so cannot draw firm conclusions on the impact. However, the consultations did suggest that the BQM was having a very positive impact on systems and support for care leaver students.

“The framework shows a good standard to work towards, a good basis where to start. It makes you audit your provision. We realised there were gaps...in how we identified care leavers and how they were made aware of finance. The framework was the driver for doing this.”

(Director for Learners).

28. Stronger links between FE colleges and professionals working with Looked After Children can directly benefit pupils in terms of ensuring they have the relevant information and advice when making decisions about HE.

Do we still need the Buttle UK Quality Mark?

29. Some universities have put forward the view that because so few students come to their university from a care background, the financial investment and dedicated resources are not warranted. However, if universities with the lower levels of intake do not renew or take up their commitment to the BQM based on this argument, it is doubtful that more care leavers would access HE over time. The care leavers’ agenda is still in its early stages, evident by the low numbers of young people coming to university from a care background. As one consultee put it: “This is not a business case”.

30. Since the BQM started in 2006, there has been a good response from HEIs with 56% of universities accredited. To ensure support to students coming from care is effective and consistent; more universities should be encouraged to align themselves with the BQM.

31. Recent analysis by the Who Cares? Trust on the type of support offered by individual HEIs revealed the BQM holders are more likely to provide dedicated support to care leavers. However there is evidence that support varies both within institutions that hold the BQM as well as between those that do and those that do not. Buttle UK’s long-term vision is that all institutions provide an exemplary level of support; 15 universities currently hold this performance rating. It would seem there is still some way to go to ensure that all care leavers receive high quality support.

32. Some staff consulted expressed concern that if the BQM loses support, the focus on providing dedicated support for care leavers would also be lost.

33. Feedback regarding Buttle UK was very positive but there were some suggestions regarding how they could improve their support for HEIs and to the agenda more generally.

Recommendations

34. This research generated a number of recommendations for the HE sector, local authorities and HSC Trusts and Buttle UK. Key recommendations coming from the research are detailed below.
Universities

35. Students have reported variations in the support received on application and at university. To improve levels of support across all universities it is recommended that all universities:

I. Become accredited with the BQM and actively aim to develop exemplary practice.

II. Seek to embed the care leavers’ agenda within institutional culture and practice with a focus on securing support among senior management.

III. Review the effectiveness of promotional activity to students previously in care to ensure they know about and have access to the designated member of staff.

IV. Develop contact arrangements with students previously in care to ensure they are invited to seek support throughout their studies, not just during the initial “settling in” period.

V. Examine the support needs (particularly financial needs) of mature students and postgraduate students previously in care and develop support services accordingly.

VI. Ensure personal support offered to students previously in care is tailored to their unique circumstances, for example reviewing support available around the holiday periods.

Local authorities and HSC Trusts

36. This research identified gaps in support for care leavers studying in HE from local authorities and HSC Trusts. To address this, the following recommendations should be considered:

I. Local authorities and HSC Trusts have a range of legal duties to care leavers in HE but also the discretionary powers to offer a much greater level of support. Directors for Children’s Services should aim to raise the level of support on offer to care leavers well above the statutory minimum, aiming to match care leavers’ needs and expectations.

II. Directors of Children’s Services (and their equivalents) should review their organisation’s approach to supporting looked after children and care leavers aspiring to HE. They should consider nominating a dedicated lead to ensure that all relevant professionals (for example foster carers, designated teachers, virtual school heads and their equivalents) know about the BQM and the support universities make available for care leavers.

III. Professionals working with looked after children and care leavers to support their education (for example foster carers, dedicated teachers, virtual school heads and their equivalents) should promote the dedicated support available to care leavers in universities among young people who could benefit and inform them about the BQM.

IV. Local authorities and HSC Trusts should actively develop partnerships with local universities to improve joined-up working and deliver better support to students previously in care.

Buttle UK

37. This research has also identified areas where Buttle UK can develop its practice to facilitate improved support. Recommendations for Buttle UK include:

I. Work with strategic bodies in the children’s social care sector (such as the national Local Government Associations) to encourage a review of local authorities’ support to looked after children and care leavers aspiring to HE.

II. Facilitate partnerships between universities that hold the BQM and FE colleges joining the scheme to enable better transitions between FE and HE.

III. Develop support and guidance for BQM institutions to help them achieve an “exemplary” standard of support for students previously in care.

IV. Consider developing minimum standards for BQM holders detailing expectations about the information universities make available to applicants and students from a care background.

V. Continue to survey student care leavers at regular periods to develop comparable data on levels of support and impact.
1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 In September 2012, Buttle UK commissioned York Consulting LLP (YCL) to carry out an evaluation of the Buttle UK Quality Mark (BQM) in Higher Education. The aim of the research was to review the impact of the BQM on Higher Education Institutions’ (HEIs) support to students previously in care. Evidence from the research will help shape thinking on future strategy to support the on-going development of the BQM and to improve support for students previously in care.

1.2 There were over 89,000 looked after children in the UK in 2011. The figures for each of the nations were:
   - England - 65,520 children were looked after on 31 March 2011;
   - Northern Ireland - 2,511 children were looked after on 31 March 2011;
   - Scotland - 16,171 children were looked after on 31 July 2011;
   - Wales - 5,415 children were looked after on 31 March 2011.

1.3 The four nations work with different data collection criteria on young people in care. Therefore, figures are not fully comparable across nations, but they provide a useful context when considering the number of young people in care and when looking at the percentage of 19 years olds’ in HE. Statistics show that the number of students coming in to HE from a care background remains extremely low. In 2011, the figures for England suggest that 6% of care leavers at the age of 19 were in HE. Data for participation rates in HE in England shows that 23% of 18 year olds and 11.2% of 19 year olds were in HE, revealing the extent of the under-representation of care leavers in HE. Unofficial figures for Northern Ireland show a similar picture with 6.5% of care leavers aged 19 in HE.

1.4 In Scotland, figures suggest the rate is lower at just 2% and comparable figures for all 19 year olds participating in HE shows 42.4% of the total population of students aged 19 were in HE.

1.5 In Wales, just over 7% of care leavers aged 19 were in HE, which represents just 24 students.

1.6 Looked After Children and young people leaving care experience a significant disadvantage in relation to other young people in terms of educational attainment and progression. This inequality begins at an early stage in the education cycle and continues in their journey through primary, secondary and Further Education (FE). This results in their significant under-representation in HE.

1.7 Even when young people from a care background have the ability and aspiration to progress on to HE, there are other factors that young people in care have reported militating against their progression to HE. These include:
   - A lack of information regarding financial support.
   - A lack of encouragement from professionals and carers in their aspirations.
   - A lack of knowledge about choices and the support available for care leavers in HE.

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10 They differ in both the date on which these figures are collected and in the definition of looked after.
11 This relates to Care Leavers aged 19 years old as at 31st March 2011. These are Department for Education Statistics ‘Children looked after by local authorities in England, including adoption’. http://www.education.gov.uk/researchandstatistics/statistics/a00213762/children-looked-after-las-england
13 Figures provided to Buttle UK from the Community Information Branch of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. No equivalent figures for participation exist for 2010/11.
14 Children’s Social Work Statistics release: http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2012/02/27586
15 Department for Children, Schools and Families (2010) Promoting the Educational Achievement of Looked After Children. DCSF-00342-2010
Quality Mark in Higher Education

Aims of Buttle UK

1.8 Buttle UK aims to improve opportunities for young people who, for a range of reasons, are disadvantaged and in need of varying kinds of support. Buttle UK distributes grants to support vulnerable young people to help improve their educational outcomes. In 2011/12, they provided nearly 10,000 individual grants through four grant programmes worth a total of £3.29 million. Grants can be used to provide small essential items, pay for school fees, funding for training or the purchase of equipment.

1.9 Recognising the links between disadvantage and young people accessing HE, Buttle UK commissioned a five-year-long piece of research to explore the experiences of 129 students going into HE. Going to University from Care revealed some of the difficulties this cohort of young people faced with regard to applying for and being at university. These included:

- Lack of information and advice at the point of application to university.
- Difficulty accessing the necessary financial support.
- Problems with accommodation.
- Lack of support from foster carers.
- Low levels of personal and emotional support from local authority personal advisors.

1.10 The findings and recommendations from Jackson et al’s (2005) research informed Buttle UK’s approach in designing the key elements of the BQM framework.

Buttle UK Quality Mark

1.11 The BQM is awarded to institutions that can demonstrate that they are developing a robust institutional-wide approach to supporting students coming to university from a care background. It encourages a review of current practice as well as the development of new services to improve and monitor the impact of support. The framework against which institutions assess their delivery of support to care leavers includes:

- Raising aspirations and achievements.
- Admissions procedures.
- Providing entry and on-going support.
- Monitoring the implementation of the commitment.

1.12 Buttle UK’s assessment panel meets regularly to assess the development of institutions’ progress through their Implementation Plans and Monitoring and Evaluation Reports. As a result of this assessment process Buttle UK assigns institutions a performance status after three years of either: minimum, developing well or exemplary. Further Monitoring visits to selected institutions are carried out by Buttle UK’s Trustees and Chief Executive throughout the year.

18 ibid
19 For more details on the framework and process of assessment see http://www.buttleuk.org/pages/quality-mark-for-care-leavers.html
Support for the Quality Mark across the UK

1.13 Figures in Table 1.1 show the number of HEIs with the BQM by nation.

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<th>Country</th>
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<th>Northern Ireland</th>
<th>Scotland</th>
<th>Total</th>
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<td>Totals</td>
<td>9* (100%)</td>
<td>71 (56%)</td>
<td>1 (25%)</td>
<td>7 (41%)</td>
<td>88 (56%)</td>
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*This figure does not include Swansea Metropolitan, which is currently merging with The University of Wales, Trinity St David.

1.14 56% of the total number of HEIs (not including FE colleges providing HE) currently hold the BQM, with an additional seven in preparation for accreditation.

1.15 Support is clearly evident across the four nations. Some governments are more prescriptive with regard to HEIs demonstrating support for care leaver students, for example:

- In Wales, there is clear political support and all universities are strongly encouraged to be accredited with the BQM with a recommendation that Widening Access Strategies make specific reference to students from a care background. As a result, all universities are accredited with the BQM.
- In Northern Ireland, there is no specific reference to care leaver students as a priority group in the recent Access to Success regional strategy. However, the Department for Employment and Learning have confirmed to Buttle UK that care leavers are an underrepresented group and that all HE providers will be encouraged to get the BQM.
- In Scotland, the Scottish Funding Council references care leavers as a protected group in guidance regarding HEIs Outcomes Agreements.

1.16 Buttle UK has reported strong links and support from key strategic bodies in each of the four nations and hopes that more universities will continue to commit to improving support to student care leavers.

Table 1.1: Number of Institutions Gaining the Quality Mark

20 Includes all universities and university colleges with public funding. Excludes FE Colleges that also deliver some HE provision e.g. Blackpool and the Fylde and independent universities i.e. Buckingham University / Glasgow School of Art and collaborations i.e. University Campus Suffolk.

21 HEFCW (2011) Learning and Teaching and Widening Access Strategies 2011/12 to 2013/14: Supplementary Guidance


24 Scottish Funding Council (2012) University Outcome Agreement Guidance for AY 2013-14
Methodological Approach

1.17 The research was guided by an evaluation framework that was agreed by Buttle UK (see Annex A, available at http://www.buttleuk.org/pages/related-publications.html). This provided a framework against which all the research tools were designed.

1.18 The research activity from which the evidence has been generated for this report included:

- Interviews with 15 HEIs currently accredited with the BQM.
- Interviews with two HEIs not currently accredited.
- Interviews with four HEIs under preparation for accreditation.
- Interviews with three FE colleges with HE provision with the BQM.
- Case studies of four universities.
- Review of Outline Project Plans, Implementation Plans and Monitoring and Evaluation Reports.
- Online survey of students.
- Online focus group of students.
- Four face to face interviews with care leaver students.

1.19 A sampling framework was agreed between the researcher and Buttle UK to ensure evidence was gained from across the range of pre and post '92 HEIs, as well as Russell Group universities and to ensure representation from all countries in the UK. The sample included a mix of institutions assessed by Buttle UK to be providing minimum, developing well and exemplary levels of support.

1.20 Case studies of HEIs focused on generating views from key professionals on the benefits of the BQM on their institutional systems and procedures, as well as examples of how they had developed their support services for students. In each case study, consultations were undertaken with:

- Senior managers responsible for the BQM in each institution (Pro-Vice Chancellor/Registrar).
- Interviews with Heads of Students Recruitment/Widening Participation/Widening Access.

- Head of Student Support Services.
- Fund managers.
- Care leaver coordinators.
- Care leaver mentors (if applicable).
- Care leaver student.
- Care leaver professional from the local authority (e.g. Looked After Children’s Support Officer, Employability Officer, Connexions Personal Advisor).

Validation of the Findings

1.21 The findings from the research have been validated in a number of ways:

- Validation meeting with Buttle UK.
- Case study write ups validated by participants.
- Quotes validated by stakeholders and young people.
- The final report validated by Buttle UK.

Structure of the Report

1.22 The report is structured as follows:

- Section Two: Impact of the BQM on Students Previously in Care.
- Section Three: Impact of the BQM on HEIs’ Support of Students Previously in Care.
- Section Four: Do We Need a Quality Mark for Students Previously in Care?
- Section Five: Conclusions and Recommendations.
2. IMPACT OF THE BUTTLE UK QUALITY MARK ON STUDENTS PREVIOUSLY IN CARE

Introduction

2.1 This section explores the impact of the BQM on students previously in care attending HEIs that have been awarded the BQM. Information has been generated from:

- An online survey of students who identified themselves as care leavers.
- An online focus group with students.
- One-to-one interviews with students.

2.2 In December 2012, an online survey was sent to key contacts in all institutions with the BQM. They were asked to forward the survey on to all students studying at their institutions who were known to be from a care background. 279 students completed the survey.

Demographics of Students Completing the Survey

2.3 68% of respondents were female and 32% male. As an indication of representation of the Looked After Children population, statistics for all Looked After Children in England shows that in 2010, 44% were female and 56% were male, which suggests an overrepresentation of females in the survey (there are no statistics showing gender and students going to HE from a care background).

2.4 84% of respondents were aged 24 or below. 16% of respondents were 25 or over, representing a significant minority of mature students responding to this survey. Although there is little research into the life trajectories of care leavers beyond the age of 21, this tallies with a recent survey carried out by the Care Leavers’ Association that suggested that a significant proportion of care leavers return to education later in life.

2.5 61% of respondents were of white ethnicity. 16% were black or black British and 12% were of mixed ethnicity. Again, comparing statistics in England for the representativeness of the sample, 73% of all Looked After Children were of white ethnicity.

2.6 91% were completing an undergraduate degree course. 39% were in their first year of study, 34% in their second year of study and 26% in their third year or more. Therefore, three fifths of students had been at university for over a year. This is relevant when asking students about the support they have received and their views on university as they should have good knowledge and experience of what is on offer.

2.7 48% of students indicated that they were studying close to home, but over a half stated they were studying at a university outside of their local area.

Impact of the BQM on Students Previously in Care Attending University

Factors Influencing Young People’s Choice of University

2.8 Table 2.1 shows the key factors influencing students’ choice of university. Students stated that information about the course, the

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27 Duncalf Zachary Care Leaver’s Association (2010). Listen Up! Adult Care Leavers Speak Out: the views of 310 care leavers aged 17-78.
29 Calculated by the distance (up to one hour’s travel) from their local authority responsible for their care and the university chosen.
15

location and reputation of the university were key factors in helping them choose their university. Following these key factors, support offered was more important to them than whether the university had the BQM.

2.9 Awareness of the Buttle UK Quality Mark was not a key factor influencing the decision making of students, and a few institutions stated that awareness of the BQM among students previously in care needed to improve. 41% of students were influenced by the financial support available and 26% by services offered by the university such as help with welfare or accommodation.

2.10 Students were also asked whether they received information about the support HEIs provide to care leavers before making their application for university and how this influenced their choice. A significant finding was that 41% of students stated they did not receive any information regarding support for care leavers.

2.11 115 (41%) students who did not receive this information stated they would like to have received information specifically focussed on care leavers. This indicates that universities should review how they communicate their offer of support in this area to prospective students.

2.12 Table 2.2 shows the importance to students of receiving information on support when making choices about which university to come to.

2.13 Information on financial support had a big impact on their choice of university. Nearly half of all those receiving information (47% n=70) stated this significantly influenced their choice of university, indicating the importance of bursaries and other financial support offered.

2.14 Students commented on other forms of support that were important when they were applying. There was particular recognition of the efforts to which some universities went to for example in meeting applicants and discussing any concerns and showing them around campus.

2.15 This research revealed how important the initial stages of support were for looked after children and care leavers at the application stage.

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**Table 2.1:** When you were thinking about which university to go to, which of the following were you interested in?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The course on offer</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The location of the university</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The reputation of the university</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The financial support available</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services offered by the university (e.g. help with welfare or accommodation)</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether the university had been awarded the Buttle UK Quality Mark</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (please specify)</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Answered question 279

---

**Table 2.2:** Did this information have any impact on your choice of university?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Answer Options</th>
<th>A significant impact</th>
<th>A small impact</th>
<th>No impact</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial support</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student/personal support</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Answered question 148

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“I felt so much relief when I actually went to university with my support worker and we sat and talked to (name of coordinator). I came away feeling that I would be happy here and that I could go to her if I needed anyone...the fact that my support worker came with me too meant a lot”

(Student previously in care).

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2.13 Information on financial support had a big impact on their choice of university. Nearly half of all those receiving information (47% n=70) stated this significantly influenced their choice of university, indicating the importance of bursaries and other financial support offered.

2.15 This research revealed how important the initial stages of support were for looked after children and care leavers at the application stage.
When I first started talking about applying to go to university with my personal advisor, I felt really daunted by it all. I never thought it was something I could do.

(Students previously in care).

2.16 It is also important for universities to endeavour as much as possible to address the gaps in information that exist among professionals, schools and colleges around support in HE for care leavers. This comment is highly typical of students’ gaps in knowledge regarding entitlement:

“The care leavers’ coordinator at university supported me) by making me aware of the financial support that I did not realise I was eligible for, as my college did not make any information available to me about care leavers, and did not approach me as one during my time at college. After leaving school I did not know being a care leaver enabled any further assistance.”

(Students previously in care).

2.17 Clearly professionals have a role to play in supporting young people from a care background in coming to university. Table 2.3 shows the extent to which professionals influenced decisions about university among care leavers responding to the survey:

Table 2.3: Who, if anyone, helped you in choosing your university, and how important was their help?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>I would not have gone to university without their support</th>
<th>I would have gone anyway but they supported me in my decision</th>
<th>They did not help me in choosing my university</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School (e.g. form tutor, Head of Year, etc.)</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>46%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foster carer/care manager</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Authority (e.g. personal advisor, education support)</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>70%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentor (university students/graduates)</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Answered question: 279

2.18 School staff were highly influential in encouraging students to apply for university, with 20% saying they would not have gone without their support. This is clearly recognised by universities who do considerable amounts of raising aspirational activity and summer school programmes for aspiring pupils. The role of foster carers is also important with 18% of care leavers stating they would not be at university without their support. Students also reported the significance of support from local authority professionals with one in ten saying they would not have gone to university without their support. However 27% felt no-one at all helped them in choosing their university, suggesting support for care leavers in choosing a university is variable and that more can be done to support them.

Local Authority/Health and Social Care Trust Support While at University

2.19 37% (n=103) of students previously in care were not in contact with anyone from their local authority / HSC Trust. Of these, 45% (n=46) would have liked support. Of the 63% (n=175) of care leavers that were still in contact with someone from their local authority / HSC Trust, 53% (n=92) were still in contact with foster carers, but only 42% (n=73) were still in contact with their social worker. This indicates the potential challenges with regard to sharing information about their support needs. It also confirms the importance of the support offered by universities.

30: I.e. those who selected “They did not help me in choosing my university” for all five rows.
2.20 Table 2.4 shows contact with local authorities / HSC Trusts by age and shows fewer people are in contact with local authorities / HSC Trusts as they get older.

2.21 81% of students between the ages of 16 and 18 were in contact with their local authority / HSC Trust, dropping to 71% for those aged between 19 and 21, and 67% for 22-24 year olds. This then drops significantly to 21% for 25-29 year olds. The drop in contact with local authorities among older students is to be expected given that authorities’ corporate parenting responsibilities reduce as care leavers age between 19 and 25. However there are still a significant minority of care leavers under 22 in the survey who do not appear to be receiving support from their corporate parent.

2.22 However, where support is continued, there are examples of good support from local authorities / HSC Trusts, providing financial and personal support to care leavers.

2.23 Gaps in support from local authorities / HSC Trusts is explored more in paragraphs 2.36-2.38.

Support Received by Students While At University

2.24 Table 2.5 shows that 59% (n=161) of students said they received some form of support from the university since starting their course.

“"My local authority has been great, in that they have paid my tuition but I have no other form of financial support other than my work."”

(Student previously in care.)
2.25 This shows that support was accessed by more students in the lower age categories (16-24) than the higher age, but students 25 years old and above still accessed support.

2.26 Table 2.6 shows the key areas of support accessed by students.

2.27 Among those students who had received support from their university, financial support was accessed by 89% and was the most important form of support to all age groups. Although percentages are too small to make any generalisations, it would seem that support to older students is important. 12 students over the age of 25 accessed financial support, which is 27% of the cohort (n = 44) completing the survey. Clearly financial support for students from a background in care is crucial, not least because often they do not have the financial backing that other students have. However, in addition, they struggle to access loans because of their unstable living arrangements.

“I applied for a career development loan but was turned down because of my credit rating (I was not registered to vote at the time and I have moved house around 30 times - not unusual for a care leaver)”

(Student previously in care).

2.28 The student quoted above, raised an interesting issue about her lack of ability to get a loan to continue her studies at Master’s level. This poses a question for the HE sector regarding support for care leavers who want to continue beyond bachelor degree level.

Table 2.6: Shows the key areas of support accessed by students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Totals</th>
<th>16-18</th>
<th>19-21</th>
<th>22-24</th>
<th>25-29</th>
<th>30+</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial Support (e.g. emergency funds student fee waiver, bursaries etc.)</td>
<td>94% (16)</td>
<td>89% (79)</td>
<td>95% (36)</td>
<td>67% (6)</td>
<td>86% (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation (e.g. accommodation available for 365 days a year, help with private landlords/ accommodation, etc.)</td>
<td>53% (9)</td>
<td>33% (29)</td>
<td>21% (8)</td>
<td>22% (2)</td>
<td>14% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student/Personal Support (e.g. a personal contact/mentor at university, etc.)</td>
<td>47.1% (8)</td>
<td>52.8% (47)</td>
<td>50.0% (19)</td>
<td>44.4% (4)</td>
<td>57.1% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5.9% (1)</td>
<td>4.5% (4)</td>
<td>2.6% (1)</td>
<td>11.1% (1)</td>
<td>14.3% (1)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Answered question 17 89 38 9 7 160

How important is support to students?

2.29 Figure 2.2 shows that 30% (n=48) of all students receiving support felt they would not have been able to continue at university without it.

Figure 2.2: What Impact Has This Support Had On You Studying At The University?

- I would not have been able to continue at university without the support
- It has made my time at university much easier than it would have been
- It has made no difference
2.30 The value of the support across the age groups was also evident from the responses. Although the numbers are small, over half of the students aged over 30 who received support would not have been able to continue their studies without this support.

**How Effective was the Support from University**

2.31 69% (n=187) of all students surveyed rated the overall support from their university as Good or Very Good. Feedback from students conducted as part of this research revealed appreciation for a range of support given to students previously in care. Financial support was particularly important but so was personal support.

2.32 Staff working in student support were clearly very dedicated, providing the best possible support for their students.

“I know you shouldn’t get attached to people, but we’ve seen them through allsorts…when they graduate, it can be so emotional.”

(Care Leaver Coordinator).

2.33 In the case study below, Alice describes her path to university, the support she received while at university and how it impacted on her achievements.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2.7: What impact has this support had on you studying at the university?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What age bracket do you fall within?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response Totals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Students’ Views on the Value of the Support Received from Staff at University

“They have supported me through finance, helping with paying off my debts…getting me into work as a student ambassador: just being there and listening and always making me feel reassured.”

“With advice on all problems I have faced. Also just knowing they are there in case of an emergency is an incredible weight off my shoulders, means that I’m not alone and there are members of staff who have dealt with people of a similar situation to me.”

“[Name of contact] has helped by speaking to seminar tutors regarding my anxiety in the seminar environment. I have had difficulties in the past with seminar discussion and the support offered by [name of contact] has meant I can attend seminars, contribute when I feel comfortable to and that I will not be singled out to answer questions.”

“I have had quite a lot of support from this university and [name of LA] Leaving Care Team which I think is vital for all care leavers to help them feel as supported and welcome as any other student.”

“I was approached by the member of staff with an offer of financial support which I accepted at a time of relationship difficulties which allowed me to move out and start afresh, and to continue in my studies, which may not have been possible otherwise.”

“I felt like giving up on university. She assisted me with the issues I was having and I changed my mind.”

“She is absolutely amazing, always there when you need a chat, I have never seen kindness in this large amount.”
2.34 This case story shows how fundamental the lead coordinator was in helping Alice access appropriate funding and in providing opportunities for her to develop her skills and confidence while at university.

2.35 However, not all students reported having wholly positive experiences in the survey and this research uncovered a significant number of students who lacked the knowledge of what was available and did not receive appropriate support from their local authority / HSC Trust or university.

Gaps in Joined Up Support for Students Coming to University from Care

2.36 Not all students experienced an appropriate level of support and in many cases, this begins with a lack of joined up support from local authorities / HSC Trusts and universities. As stated above, over a third of all students stated they were no longer receiving support from their local authority. However when she was in her first year at the new university her financial issues continued.

"Student Finance were not helpful and told me I wasn’t entitled to anything despite sending all the relevant information about my personal circumstances. I was trying to live on what the local authority was giving me, but I couldn’t. I was having to make choices between buying a book that I needed or eating. I couldn’t socialise with my peers so I found it difficult to develop friendships and settle in. I never lived the full student life in the first year because I couldn’t afford it until the Student Support Team [at university] helped me” (Alice).

In her new university, student support services helped her sort out her finances, liaising with Student Finance and she settled well into her studies. They also recently helped her in her applications for employment.

"Without their support I wouldn’t be where I am today. I got a First (class of degree) and I can honestly say there is a direct correlation between the grade I got and the support I received” (Alice).

Alice is now being supported with references from the university to get employment as a teaching assistant in a school in Merseyside.

Alice’s Story

Alice went to her local further education college to do her A Levels in English, Media and Religious Studies. Alice struggled to make ends meet financially and stated that her further education college did not give her adequate support. She received no help with choosing a university or with her personal statement and she feels this resulted in her receiving only one offer; which she accepted at her local university. Alice was misinformed by her social worker who advised her not to take out a student loan to avoid getting in to debt. The local authority instead advised Alice to use the combined amount of the grants and bursaries to cover the university tuition fees. She used the full amount of the grants (about £2900) and the bursary from her university to cover the full cost of her tuition fees. This left her very little to live on, just £78 a week and she never settled due to financial and personal issues.

“I was being bullied by someone there and wanted to be moved. When I went to Student Support they said ‘come back if it gets any worse’. I remember walking out from that meeting thinking, I have to leave because I don’t know what else to do” (Alice).

Alice did leave and chose another university further afield, requiring her to move. Her social worker provided good support in helping Alice move, applying for funding costs for a removal van. However when she was in her first year at the new university her financial issues continued.

"Student Finance were not helpful and told me I wasn’t entitled to anything despite sending all the relevant information about my personal circumstances. I was trying to live on what the local authority was giving me, but I couldn’t. I was having to make choices between buying a book that I needed or eating. I couldn’t socialise with my peers so I found it difficult to develop friendships and settle in. I never lived the full student life in the first year because I couldn’t afford it until the Student Support Team [at university] helped me” (Alice).

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“Without their support I wouldn’t be where I am today. I got a First (class of degree) and I can honestly say there is a direct correlation between the grade I got and the support I received” (Alice).

Alice is now being supported with references from the university to get employment as a teaching assistant in a school in Merseyside.
“Some local authorities are really easy to engage with and understand what we’re trying to do, and others seem impenetrable. No matter how much we try to get links with (local authority name), it just seems to fall on deaf ears.”

(Head of Student Support Services).

2.37 Staff in institutions regularly reported not receiving pathway plans, (most never having seen one) and care leaver students did not understand that they should have one. This is all evidence of a lack of communication and/or support during transition from FE to HE.

2.38 The differences between local authority / HSC Trust team structures was considered to be one of the key barriers preventing institutions from developing firm links with local authority support staff. Many consultees within student support services requested that local authorities nominate a designated lead similar to schools to help improve communication.

2.39 Many students consulted as part of this research expressed concerns regarding levels of support from local authorities / HSC Trusts.

Students’ Views on the Gaps in Support from Local Authorities

“I think that local authorities such as leaving care teams should be more supportive with care leavers. I am currently having issues with the designated team even though guidelines state I am entitled to help whilst being in further education.”

“I am really grateful for all the support I have received from the university and would not have been able to do all I have done without it. I do, however, feel that I could have had extra help from my local authority as I have spoken to other care leavers who have had extra financial support with university fees and advice on how to go about applying for student finance.”

“I wanted a one-to-one before starting the course, face to face help and support when issues arise. It would have been nice to have someone who knew the system.”

Gaps in Support at University

2.40 When students arrived at university, this survey revealed gaps in support among institutions that hold the BQM. 37% (n=103) of all students surveyed had not received any support. (28%) of these were mature students (aged 25 and over) and 7% were postgraduates.

2.41 37% (n=103) and one half of all mature students stated they did not know whether or not there is a designated member of staff for care leavers at the university suggesting more could be done to make students aware of this role.

2.42 Particular areas of need highlighted were in personal support and for universities to be sensitive about their unique circumstances.

Students’ Views on the Gaps in Support in Higher Education

“Emotional support at times can be really important. For a care leaver, it is very easy to feel alone in university at times of holidays (i.e. Christmas Holidays). I had to stay on campus and there was no support from university whatsoever, and it has been quite lonely and depressing, having nowhere else to go.”

“Someone to talk to when I have a problem since everyone else can go home to their parents at the end of the day. We can’t and have to deal with everything ourselves which sometimes gets too much to handle.”

“Mainly financial and greater understanding; the majority of my peers have families that they are able to return to during holiday periods. As a care leaver I do not. Also being a mature student means that I have zero support from my local authority.”

“I, like many care leavers, suffer with self esteem problems. Counselling is available for only a limited number of sessions; an increase for care leavers would be nice. Also my high school education was pretty patchy (again like many care leavers). It would have been nice to have been offered extra support education wise.”

“Counselling, as university can be especially lonely and it can be very...
2.43 Many of the students, when asked what additional support they would have liked, detailed support that would more than likely have been available had they asked. However, as some of the comments revealed, some students particularly from a care background may lack the confidence to seek help. Universities need to ensure that their initial contact with students is not the only form of offer of help and that they do regularly contact students to offer help. Universities graded as exemplary often stated they did a regular ‘check in’ to see if students needed any support. This would seem vital.

Summary

2.44 The section details the varying levels of awareness of support as well as support received by student care leavers. It also reveals the importance of the dedicated financial and personal support to students previously in care. They are particularly vulnerable due to their lack of family support and their levels of resilience can be tested at university, particularly during the holiday periods. The wealth of comments received were testament to the young people’s strength of views about their support: either very grateful for the extent of support they had received or suggesting ways that this could be improved.
3. IMPACT OF THE BUTTLE UK QUALITY MARK ON HEIS’ SUPPORT OF STUDENTS PREVIOUSLY IN CARE

3.1 This section explores the evidence gathered from the research that demonstrates the value of the BQM on HEIs’ commitment to supporting students accessing HE from a background in care.

3.2 It describes both the benefits of gaining the BQM, in terms of the process itself, and describes some of the improvements in support that universities have instigated as a result of their engagement with the BQM.

Value of the Quality Mark on HEIs’ Commitment to Care Leaver Students

3.3 Consulting with all HEIs revealed a high level of commitment to supporting students from a care background as part of all universities’ widening participation strategies. Clearly, HEIs undertake considerable activities and provide a wide range of support to students from a care background. This report does not and should not represent this activity as being the result of gaining the BQM. Indeed, Buttle UK promotes the BQM as a way for universities to “demonstrate” their commitment to care leavers. However, evidence from this research has shown that the BQM provides more than an emblem of universities’ commitment: it encourages a whole-institution approach, offering practical ways of monitoring, reviewing and improving support to care leavers, ensuring coordination of support through a dedicated staff member supporting student care leavers. It also encourages and, to an extent, enables greater levels of joint working with key agencies and professionals who recognise the BQM as a mark of quality for support for student care leavers.

The Buttle UK Quality Mark Underpins HEIs’ Commitment to Care Leavers

3.4 In many cases the perceived value of the BQM was that it validated the good support that universities were already providing to students from a care background. Often universities stated that they had been developing their support to student care leavers for a number of years, but that the BQM was an opportunity to be recognised for the good practice.

“It has helped us focus on what we do. We already had a process in place for what we were doing specifically for care leavers anyway. The BQM has, however, shown other HEIs and LAs that we have a good standard of care.”

(Head of Widening Participation and Admissions).

3.5 The BQM also ensures institutions focus on care leavers as a specific cohort from within the disadvantaged cohort of students:

“It ensures recognition at senior levels of the needs of a distinct priority group.”

(Head of Student Development).
3.6 This is particularly important when considering how the background of care leavers influences their aspirations, decisions and opportunities to go to university. It also ensures that HEIs focus on establishing links with key partners and professionals (e.g. Looked After Teams) responsible for their care.

The Buttle UK Quality Mark Facilitates the Development of Institution-Wide Approaches

3.7 Staff from student support services clearly recognised the value of the BQM in their role, stating it affords student services ‘much needed kudos’, and helps facilitate engagement from staff across the university departments.

3.8 Gaining the BQM requires evidence that the Vice Chancellor or Pro-Vice Chancellor commits to achieving the aims of the BQM. This level of senior buy-in provides staff responsible for developing and implementing the BQM the necessary support, finances and resources to develop the support.

“The Quality Mark is recognised around the university and so makes advocacy work easier.”

(Head of Student Advice and Wellbeing).

3.9 Having the BQM endorsed at the senior level encourages and enables staff responsible for the agenda to broaden out awareness raising, training and support across the university. This ensures that, as much as possible, students receive appropriate support regardless of their faculty and area of study. There were examples of some universities delivering awareness raising training to a diverse range of staff including library staff, cleaning staff and housing support staff.

“We’ve worked closely with our housing provider, and delivered training to ensure they understand the need to support students from a care background.”

(Care Leavers Coordinator).

3.10 Since gaining the BQM, many universities commented that they have built the training into the staff induction programme, helping to develop a common understanding of the needs of this group of students.

“The Buttle UK Quality Mark is an Effective Framework to Monitor Support to Care Leavers

3.11 Achieving the BQM requires institutions to demonstrate coordination of support from a range of functions within institutions including widening participation, admissions, finance, student support and accommodation. The process of evidencing support within institutions encourages a review of the range and accessibility of support on behalf of student care leavers. Indeed, some universities consulted, who were preparing for accreditation, stated the process itself had revealed weaknesses in support and gaps in their knowledge.

“Our services are not joined up. Advice and Counselling, Housing… we don’t know how many students from care we’ve got as we don’t track and departments don’t know how to find out. This is the beginning of a much needed process.”

(Head of Outreach and Widening Participation).

3.12 Many institutions had established implementation groups initially to help design the package of support and in some institutions, these groups have been integrated into reviews of student support services more broadly.
Implementing the BQM at Swansea University

Back in 2007, when the university first applied for the BQM, an Implementation Group was established to develop support for care leavers. The BQM application was backed by the senior management of the university. The Implementation Group was headed by the Director of Student Services and consisted of staff from across the key areas within the university including: Student Recruitment, Admissions, Student Services, Money Advice and Support, Accommodation and Careers.

“The fact that Management at the highest level backed the application and the Implementation Group was headed by a senior staff member meant that there was full commitment. We have maintained momentum from the beginning and care leavers are now fully embedded in the Widening Access agenda at Swansea”
(Head of Student Support Services).

The University of Swansea is judged by Buttle UK to be providing exemplary support for care leaver students and has continued to develop its support to include mentors for care leavers and support for foster carers through a partnership with The Fostering Network. The monitoring and evaluation group is led by the Registrar and Chief Operations Officer who oversees the agenda and is fully supportive of the BQM.

“There is an unreserved commitment to this agenda. It’s not about the business case, it’s about what’s right. We absolutely need to focus on this to ensure equal opportunities for this group of students”
(Registrar).

Swansea University also leads the South West Wales Reaching Wider Partnership and has held workshops to improve practice and support for Looked After Children for professionals working across the education and social care sectors.

3.13 The requirement of the BQM to monitor and evaluate original commitments ensures that institutions identify challenges and continue to review progress. There are no other systems requiring institutions to review support for care leavers and, therefore, the BQM complements commitments set out in HEIs’ widening participation strategies by ensuring aims and plans are effectively reviewed and commitments to widening participation are extended.

3.14 Monitoring the numbers of care leavers coming into HE is also a requirement of the BQM to ensure institutions understand recruitment and retention levels of care leaver students each year. Some universities stated that retention of students from disadvantaged backgrounds more generally is a concern and the requirement of the BQM to track student care leavers helps ensure this is regular practice. This has led some universities to look at the suitability of accommodation as well as other forms of support to students that affects retention.

3.15 Data provided to Buttle UK from BQM institutions for the academic year 2010-2011 indicates that 94% of care leaver students were retained in their first year of study as at December 2010. This compares favourably to the UK wide statistic on retention of students with 8% of students leaving in their first year of studies.

The Buttle UK Quality Mark Improves the Coordination of Support for Students from a Care Background

3.16 A key feature of the BQM is the role of a named contact and key coordinator who is responsible for meeting the needs of care leaver students. There was strong evidence provided by consultations with students, HEI staff and professionals supporting students applying for university that the coordinator role has helped join up support; support that may have been available, but that was previously difficult to access:

“It’s not just about having support. Support needs to be proactive and easy to get to”
(Care Leaver Coordinator).

3.17 Support includes meeting students on open days, helping students’ access financial support, responding to any issues relating to accommodation and other personal or study matters.
People fall through the cracks... It's so difficult for students to get finance and accommodation. Young people go round the houses providing evidence... eligibility for SAAS funding... support is there but it's no use if care leavers cannot access it.”

(Head of Support Services).

3.18 There is evidence that, without this level of one-to-one, dedicated support (for example helping students apply for grants, liaising with landlords around deposits for accommodation) some students would not have continued their studies. Comments from students about the benefit of the key coordinator role revealed the importance of having a designated person offering support.

Students Views of the Benefits to Students of the Key Coordinator Role

“I think the support at [name of university] is great. There are named people we know we can go to, organised events for care leavers to get involved with and point people in the right direction for specific support.”

“When I haven’t known how to solve something he has always been at the other end of the phone to help me.”

“He’s been very helpful; he kept in touch to check I am ok. I only wish he had been in place when I started my foundation degree, as he only started a couple of years ago, as the person before did nothing to promote the help available, whereas [name of coordinator] is getting the word out and helping those who require it.”

3.19 In addition, staff undertaking this role were also clear about the added value they brought to care leaver students:

“Before I took over this role, support was not joined up and students had difficulty in accessing support.”

(Care Leaver Coordinator).

The Quality Mark Encourages a Focus on Partnership Work

3.20 A key criterion of the BQM is that universities foster effective links with other HEIs and colleges, local authorities / Health and Social Care Trusts and schools and colleges to promote opportunities in HEI and provide advice and support about progressing to HE. All participants in the research were clear that effective support to students from a care background requires professionals to work together to share information on behalf of their young people/students.

“Students coming from care have such a unique set of circumstances that many simply wouldn’t get to or stay on at university if we didn’t work together on their behalf.”

(Care Leavers Project Coordinator).

“Many people in Higher Education do not understand the Looked After Children agenda and lack the knowledge and understanding of what being a Looked After Child means.”

(The Fostering Network).

3.21 In the early stages of developing a response to the BQM, HEIs stated they partnered with other institutions to discuss challenges and share practice. In some areas, this has continued and HEIs are actively working together. Buttle UK contributes to many of the networks operating across the UK delivering workshops and drawing on effective practice across the UK.
Sharing of Knowledge and Effective Practice in Scotland

In Scotland the University of Strathclyde works very closely with Buttle UK and other HEIs in Scotland to share knowledge and effective practice. Drawing on the expertise from the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children in Care in Scotland (CELCIS) hosted at the university, the university’s Buttle UK Quality Mark group delivers workshops and seminars for colleagues in Scottish universities and colleges who work with and support students from a looked-after background. CELCIS works together with the Centre for Learning Enhancement and Academic Development at Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU LEAD) and supports the Buttle UK Quality Mark Group in running workshops with local authorities and with care home staff to ensure they know about the process of application and support that is available at the university. The Buttle UK Quality Mark group has focused on working through link teachers in 30 schools in Scotland to encourage identification of pupils in care.

“This work can be difficult and response from schools is piecemeal and dependent upon links with local authority teams pushing the agenda. For us, the BQM encourages us to keep putting out the links and opportunities”

(Outreach Officer).

The BQM process encouraged universities to set up a forum to facilitate partnership working among universities in the region. For example, if a care leaver student does not get into one university they contact other universities to request they consider their application.

3.22 There are many examples of networks across the UK supported by HEIs coming together to share ideas and challenges around widening participation among care leavers. Buttle UK is actively engaged in all countries in the UK supporting and promoting the agenda through networking and recognise the value of this activity across the UK. This helps support the agenda and keeps HEIs actively engaged.

3.23 Areas where partnership work is very active demonstrates the value of this work, particularly in ensuring a continuation of support for students leaving their local areas and coming to university.

Effective Partnership Working in Merseyside

In Merseyside, the Care Leavers Project Coordinator based in the Student Advice and Wellbeing Centre in Liverpool John Moores leads a Care Leavers into Higher Education network. This network is a relic of Aim Higher that has continued despite having no funding. Key professionals from all the HEIs, local FE colleges, Connexions and Looked After Teams from the local authorities attend to share information to improve support for care leavers and broader topical issues. The network is very strong and facilitates the sharing of information about individual students as well as broader issues concerning support for care leavers.

“The fact that the universities have the Buttle Award in Merseyside drives this agenda forward.”

(Connexions Team Manager, Merseyside).

In the last meeting, a discussion was held regarding the need to raise awareness of the BQM amongst young people in care to ensure they have the knowledge to recognise those universities providing dedicated support to care leavers. There are particular features about Merseyside that help to join up support. Across Merseyside, the Connexions service continues and is contracted to provide dedicated support to care leavers, working alongside social workers in the Looked After Teams. Staff are recruited into Employability Teams that work alongside the Looked After Teams on the Wirral and are responsible for supporting young people into further or Higher Education and employment. Together they work with schools to identify young people who have the ability to go onto Higher Education. The Employability Team works with relevant foster carers and social workers to ensure that support is joined up. As a result of dedicated staff, working relationships between universities and the various professionals working with care leavers is very good.

“When I compare the support provided by other universities where they don’t have a single point of contact, the young people have to go to different people to get help. At John Moores, it’s a one-stop shop. I trust my Student Care Leaver is going to get the best support”

(Employability Support Officer, Looked After Team).
3.24 However, many universities spoke of the huge variation in levels of support, both financial and personal support, offered to aspiring students from local authorities across the UK. This comment from a manager of student finance was quite a common perception among staff in universities:

“Many social workers don’t understand all the funding that’s available and how to apply for it. It’s essential that we have a good relationship with them to help them support their Student Care Leaver.”

(Money Advice and Support Officer Manager).

3.25 Some universities are delivering training to foster carers integrated into their mandatory training schedule to ensure that foster carers support the aspirations of young people in their care. Training also includes information about what financial support is available.

“Many foster carers assume that they will be liable for the full fees and cost of going to university. They simply do not know what support is available.”

(Head of Student Finance).

3.26 However, not all universities deliver training to foster carers. The Fostering Network, the leading foster care charity in the UK, stated how important this particular area of work was in ensuring that children in foster care receive appropriate support and advice about their choices in HE:

“The University of Ulster has developed its outreach work with schools considerably since committing to the care leavers agenda and gaining the BQM in 2009. They appointed a Student Support Outreach Advisor to oversee the work for the BQM who is funded directly to work with care leaver students and aspiring students. He has developed strong links with schools and the university has increased its outreach capacity through the provision of summer schools for disadvantaged pupils. This is provided in conjunction with its Sports Academy and Engineering and Computing Department.

The summer schools provide experiences for groups of disadvantaged students in Year 9, giving them an opportunity to taste university life. They stay on campus for a week and are given tuition in computing and sports, offered the chance to develop their cooking skills and are also taken on ‘fun trips’ to the cinema, for example:

“The idea is to promote the university experience to young people who would not otherwise think of going to university, to make it more accessible to them and to get them to think this is an option”

(Student Support Outreach Advisor).

Each year the university strives to develop its support for care leaver students, and is fully supportive of Buttle UK and the purpose of the BQM:

“If there’s no pressure group keeping looked after children on the agenda, universities would move to a language of disadvantage”

(Student Support Outreach Advisor).
3.30 Many universities in England stated they were working through the Virtual Head role to promote HE to staff working to support pupils from a care background.

3.31 In relation to this agenda, the BQM encourages universities to continually reflect and expand opportunities to engage pupils from a care background in HE.

“We have developed this work more recently as part of our increased attention on raising aspirations among students from a care background.”
(Staff Support Outreach Adviser).

3.32 Working with schools however is not without challenges. Many HEIs have reported barriers and uneven responses when trying to develop relationships with schools in local areas.

“That is strategic leads for Looked After Children vary greatly, some people are not active in their role and are more difficult to work with…. some schools are fantastically receptive and we have developed great links.”
(Pre-Enrolment Officer).

3.33 Buttle UK piloted the BQM in FE colleges in 2010 and rolled it out in 2012. To date, 43 colleges have gained the BQM.

Benefits of the BQM to FE Colleges

3.34 Many students from a care background study at further education colleges before gaining access to university. This research suggests there are considerable benefits in colleges gaining the BQM, both in terms of developing their own support structures and for care leavers going to university.

3.35 While this research covered HE only, the consultations included three further education colleges providing HE. They revealed how significant obtaining the BQM has been for their institution. Colleges delivering pilot activity in Scotland shared ideas on the challenges and on practices to improve support for care leavers. One FE college stated that:

“We wouldn’t be where we are without it. There’s a lot to be gained from it.”
(Director for Learners).

3.36 The BQM is credited as encouraging a greater level of partnership between the schools:

Before, we didn’t have the kudos to talk to heads and school staff schools about learners from care. It [the BQM] gave us kudos, and then this agenda was taken to principals’ meetings and academic team meetings. It makes life so much easier when people recognise what you are doing. Doors opened a little bit easier… it raised the profile of our team and the work we do. It also proved we were robust in our mission and meant business in our support for care leavers.”
(Designated Lead for Learner Protection).

3.37 One college has focussed closely on transition from school to college developing links with housing associations and local authorities, the police and other agencies working with young people from a care background to promote further education opportunities. Many of their students come from areas of high deprivation and many underachieve at school. Therefore, links with agencies have to be developed for pupils not currently in further education to get them back into education.
We’ve looked at how we develop relationships with social workers to make sure we can promote what we offer and can recommend appropriate provision."

(Principal, FE College).

3.38 One college stated that, before the BQM, the college had no mechanism to know who was a Looked After Child coming into college: there was very little communication with the local authority about it. Since gaining the BQM and having a designated lead at the college, communication between the local authority and college has improved.

"The framework shows a good standard to work towards, a good basis where to start. It makes you audit your provision. We realised there were gaps...in how we identified care leavers and how they were made aware of finance. The framework was the driver for doing this."

(Director for Learners).

3.39 As a result, this college’s support for care leaver students improved. The numbers of care leavers identified ‘shot up’: before the BQM the college had identified fewer than 10 care leavers in any given year; last year they had 41.

**Benefits to Pupils from a Care Background**

3.40 Stronger links between FE colleges and agencies working with Looked After Children can benefit pupils directly in terms of ensuring they have the relevant information and advice for HE. Pupils surveyed as part of this research (detailed in the next section) reported problems with a lack of information about available financial support, writing personal statements for HE applications, and many staff in HEIs reported a lack of knowledge among social care professionals of what support is available. As young people prepare to transfer from school into FE, colleges are better placed in terms of forging links with social care professionals to determine suitable pathways of learning and support for young people. Engaging in the BQM will provide the necessary framework to encourage this relationship.

"(Without the BQM) it would have been more challenging to further improve certain areas. For example initial Information, Advice and Guidance was not the full responsibility of our team...It gave us focus to further improve our provision and external partnerships."

(Designated Lead for Learner Protection).

**Summary**

3.41 The BQM as a framework clearly improves the degree to which HEIs and FE colleges review, monitor and extend their support across their institution. Without the BQM framework, it could be argued that the focus on support and understanding of the gaps in support will be less likely to be acknowledged or understood. The fact that the BQM encourages universities to champion this agenda aids partnership working. Staff responsible for promoting and progressing support within institutions stated that it provides much needed kudos and results in greater levels of engagement from staff within institutions and other professionals in schools and social services.
4. DO WE NEED A QUALITY MARK FOR STUDENTS PREVIOUSLY IN CARE?

4.1 This section articulates the arguments put forward by those consulted as part of this research regarding the value of the BQM to the widening participation agenda. It also provides a review of the impact and evidence base for the continuing need for the BQM.

Impact of the Buttle UK Quality Mark on the HE Sector

4.2 It is worth considering how the landscape in HE has changed in recent years with regards to the HE sector’s focus on students previously in care. In 2005, Buttle UK’s research\(^3\) revealed that before the start of the BQM, only one university in the UK had a comprehensive policy on care leavers. Now, the situation has clearly changed, and there is take-up of the BQM across all nations in the UK albeit to varying levels as shown in Section 1.

4.3 When considering the degree to which student care leavers are referenced within key documents in each nation and the awareness of the care leaver agenda more generally across HE, it is possible that the need for continuing to promote the BQM is less urgent. However, this research has shown that student care leavers’ experience of support varies considerably, even among those BQM holding institutions. In addition, recent analysis of English universities’ Access Agreement by the Who Cares? Trust\(^3\) revealed that of the top 20 universities, eight did not make specific reference to support for care leavers and only three of the top ten universities have set targets or milestones for the recruitment of care leaver students. As evidenced by this research, the BQM is a valuable tool that encourages universities to monitor their intake of students previously in care and to provide necessary support to improve their likelihood of completing their studies.

4.4 Some universities have put forward the view that, because so few students come to their university from a care background, the financial investment and dedicated resources associated with the BQM are not warranted. Looking at universities’ statistical returns submitted to Buttle UK, overall numbers of care leaver students are still low. The intake of students previously in care also varies considerably across BQM universities. For the academic year 2010/11, six universities reported between 41 and 80 starts, six universities reported between ten and 40, and 37 reported fewer than ten.

4.5 Therefore, it could be argued that, for those universities with a higher intake of care leavers, supporting the BQM is a more valid decision than for those universities with a lower intake. However, if universities with a low level intake do not renew or take-up a commitment to the BQM based on this argument, it is doubtful that numbers of care leavers accessing HE would increase over time. It raises a broader point for consideration: are numbers a relevant argument at this point in the agenda? As one consultee put it: “this is not a business case”. It also seems misleading to judge the impact of the BQM on intake levels at this stage when there are so many other factors that militate against care leavers coming into HE.

4.6 It is worth pointing out that statistical returns from BQM universities do indicate an increase in the number of student care leavers identified in HEIs. Calculating the average intake (to take into account an annual increase in universities submitting data), the

\(^3\) Jackson, S., Ajayi, S. and Quigley M (2005) Going to University from Care.
data does show an increase from two students per institution in 2007 to 20 students per institution in 2010.

4.7 However, collating meaningful data on care leaver starts is hampered by the fact that the UCAS tick box is largely unhelpful, some stating it is a ‘red herring’ as students who are not care leavers often tick the box. There is also the factor that some care leavers do not wish to be identified as a care leaver; so some may not be identified. Buttle UK is working with Quality Mark institutions to improve data collection about care leavers within institutions and working with strategic bodies to improve national data collection.

Evidence of Varying Levels of Support to Care Leavers within Higher Education Institutions

4.8 The BQM is a way for institutions to demonstrate commitment to supporting care leavers; it is not a guarantee that all students previously in care will receive all the support they need. Therefore, it seems pertinent that universities are encouraged to continually develop their support. A number of consultees stated that ‘we do it anyway’ (provide support to care leavers), and that the BQM is simply a method of ‘endorsing what we already do’. However, research has evidenced that support still varies between universities.

4.9 Buttle UK recognises the need to encourage universities to continually review and develop their provision. Their longer-term vision is that institutions develop their offer of support and make efforts to progress to exemplary status.

4.10 At the point of assessment for renewal, institutions are provided with a performance ‘status’ from minimum, developing well to exemplary. Table 4.1 shows the performance rating of institutions that hold the BQM.

Table 4.1: Performance Rating of Higher Education Institutions Holding the BQM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Minimum</th>
<th>Developing Well</th>
<th>Exemplary</th>
<th>Newly Accredited*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*IInstitutions are given a performance rating after 3 years when being assessed for renewal. “Newly accredited” institutions are those in their first three years of Quality Mark membership.

4.11 Consultations and documentation submitted to Buttle UK revealed variations in support, particularly between the minimum and exemplary institutions. There was evidence of variation in levels of support at the senior level across universities. A significant number of staff from universities described senior level engagement/involvement as being remote, while others described more ‘hands on’ involvement, particularly in the initial developmental stages. Staff in student support were sometimes reliant upon one key senior manager to champion the BQM, revealing degrees of vulnerability around decisions to renew.

4.12 Exemplary institutions can demonstrate senior management actively engaging in the agenda (for example being engaged in review meetings), and that practices to raise aspirations and coordinate support within the institutions are a key priority. In addition, the degree to which support is embedded across departments/campuses/faculties appears to vary. Some exemplary universities are constantly extending training to a range of staff, both within the university and outside to foster care teams for example.

4.13 On a more general note about the impact of the BQM, there is evidence that the type of support available varies between institutions that hold the BQM and those that do not. The Who Cares? Trust has compiled a Handbook detailing types of support offered by universities in England and Scotland for care leavers. Each university was asked to submit whether they provided support around an eight point checklist that included: provision of a dedicated website; 365 days accommodation; a dedicated support worker; and financial support. There were a higher percentage of institutions with the

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BQM providing this type of support than those without the BQM. 94% of universities with the BQM provided a dedicated website for care leavers against only 38% without the BQM.

4.14 When considering this recent analysis from The Who Cares? Trust and the evidence presented above showing uneven levels of support, there is a strong case, not only for a continuation of the BQM but for universities to aim for an exemplary status.

Support for Buttle UK

4.15 There is considerable support for Buttle UK and support more generally from institutions within the HE sector regarding the care leaver agenda. Some staff consulted expressed concern that the focus on providing dedicated support for care leavers would be lost if the BQM loses support.

“…Buttle has an excellent reputation and we thought gaining the BQM would highlight the excellent work we were doing and provide impetus for better work. We felt it would raise awareness of the work we do within the rest of the college and raise our profile.”

(FE College, Student Support).

4.16 However, there are other factors that are clearly contributing to HEIs decisions on whether to be accredited and indeed whether or not to renew the BQM. These include:

• Getting agreement/support from senior management within HEIs.
• Having the resources and capacity to prepare for accreditation.
• Considering the BQM to be value for money.

4.17 We have spoken to some universities who do not currently hold the BQM (one being a Russell Group University) and it appears that the barriers to accreditation are with senior management within certain universities not supporting accreditation. Staff within widening access are aware of the benefits to the widening participation agenda, but are not able to proceed due to lack of senior management support.

4.18 Decisions at the senior level will be governed partly by availability of resources and the capacity within key departments to support accreditation:

“It is quite resource intensive initially and you do have to dedicate time to it so it has to be planned in to the schedule for the year.”

(Head of Outreach and Access).

4.19 A number of institutions were considering the value for money aspect and there were some suggestions about how the levels of support and communication from Buttle UK could be developed. Some suggestions were:

• Stimulate an increase in awareness of the BQM among students.
• Support with lobbying local authorities regarding their corporate parenting responsibilities.
• Encourage a review of the lack of pathway planning and information transfer from local authorities to FE and HE.
• Encourage the sharing of effective practice through their web portal, drawing on evidence from across exemplary institutions.
• Continue to develop and promote the Quality Mark among FE colleges.

4.20 This research will feed into future planning of the BQM accreditation framework and decisions on future strategies to embed support for care leavers in the HEI sector.

Funding the role may also be challenging in this environment. The project was initially funded to ensure that the (name of institution) ensured a commitment to care leavers within the Widening Access Agreement for a four year period. The four years come to an end in April 2013. Efforts are being made to seek continuous funding and support.”

(Student Support Outreach Advisor).

“If there’s no pressure group keeping Looked After Children on the agenda, universities would move to a language of disadvantage only.”

(Student Support Outreach Advisor).

“We need to have an organisation like Buttle to keep care leavers on the agenda as a distinct group, otherwise it would just get lost.”

(Director of Access).

ButtleUK expanded the Quality Mark scheme to include Further Education Colleges in 2012.
Impact of the BQM on Students from a Care Background

5.1 The research engaged students previously in care to get their opinions of the support they received both in accessing HE and while at university.

5.2 Students reported how important getting access to the right information was for them when making decisions about going into HE. Information about the availability of financial support had a big impact on their choice of university: nearly a half saying that this was a significant factor. Some students reported how crucial the support was at the application stage and that, without it, they may not have got to university. This included joined up support from social workers and universities, particularly meeting students on open days and providing relevant information.

5.3 However, just over two out of five students stated they received no information relating to support for care leavers, suggesting universities need to improve their flow of information regarding support for prospective students in transition from care.

5.4 When at university, three fifths of students received some form of support and just less than two fifths stated they would not have been able to continue without it. This included financial support as well as support on accommodation and personal issues. Support was also important for those students aged 25 years and over: a quarter of students in this age bracket who completed the survey had accessed financial support.

5.5 Having a designated coordinator improved support for students who gave many examples of the value of this role to their experience of university. However, over a third stated they did not know there was a designated coordinator, suggesting that more could be done to raise awareness of this role.

5.6 However, not all students experienced an appropriate level of support and, in many cases, this begins with a lack of joined up support from local authorities and universities. Over a third of all students stated they were no longer receiving support from their local authorities, and many stated that the support they had received was insufficient.

The Impact of the Buttle UK Quality Mark on HEIs’ Support

5.7 There are clear benefits to universities of having the BQM. The fact that the BQM is endorsed by senior management (Vice Chancellor/Pro-Vice Chancellor) provides staff working in widening participation and student services much needed kudos and leverage across university departments. As a result, staff coordinating the BQM activities reported a greater level of awareness among administrative and academic staff of the need to support student care leavers.

5.8 Not only does the BQM underpin HEIs’ commitment to students previously in care, the framework encourages cross-institutional support systems. HEI staff responsible for drawing up the Outline Project Plan stated that this was a valuable process in getting the various departments (Marketing, Admissions, Student Support, Finance, and Accommodation) together to confirm their support offer. In many universities, implementation groups have continued to review and monitor progress.

5.9 Maintaining the BQM also ensures universities focus on care leavers as a specific group within the disadvantaged cohort of students: universities with the BQM now track care leaver numbers and monitor their progress as well as their support. This has resulted in many universities knowing, for the first time, how many students care leavers are recruited and complete their studies each year.

5.10 Having the BQM also demonstrates to professionals working on behalf of young people aspiring to higher education that the HEI provides dedicated support to care leavers. According to staff in student support, social workers and personal advisors working on behalf of care leavers have contacted the universities for advice after seeing they have the BQM.
5.11 Access to support has improved as universities have appointed designated coordinators to support students previously in care. This is a key requirement of the BQM and has improved the support for students and professionals. Key coordinators reported advocating on behalf of students on many occasions on issues such as accommodation, debt and student finances. Students regularly reported the difference that key coordinators had on their wellbeing at university and, without this role, there is evidence that students would have left their studies.

5.12 Universities carry out a significant amount of partnership activity with schools, other HEIs and FE colleges and the BQM can be credited with influencing this in some areas. There was evidence that the BQM facilitates a common dialogue and understanding of the agenda among partners. This is in part driven by the dedicated coordinator within HEIs working together to share practice and develop pathways of support.

Challenges to Improving Support for Care Leavers

5.13 In some areas, links with local authorities / HSC Trusts were strong, but in other areas, non-existent. This was considered to be a factor relating to a lack of knowledge and understanding among social care staff of the need to work in partnership, as well as a lack of capacity to respond. Some Looked After Children’s Education Services teams provide high levels of one-to-one support for care leavers in HE and communication with HEIs is good; some provide very little of both. Students corroborated high levels of variation in both financial and personal support coming from local authorities / HSC Trusts. This research confirms the existence of a “postcode lottery” affecting support for students from a care background.

5.14 HEIs endeavour to respond to all needs of student care leavers, but this is sometimes time consuming, and they have asked that this report requests that more emphasis be put on local authority Looked After Children and Leaving Care teams to review their support of students and joint working with HEIs.

5.15 The BQM encourages HEIs to reflect on their practice and share ideas with other institutions. HEIs reported that working in some schools is easier as the dedicated lead for care leavers in particular schools is more engaged in the agenda. In some schools, this is more difficult when the dedicated worker is not engaged in the agenda.

Impact of the Buttle UK Quality Mark on Further Education Colleges

5.16 This research included consultations with three FE colleges: two in England and one in Scotland. All reported very positive developments and changes in their institutions as a direct result of going for the BQM. FE colleges possibly have greater potential to develop joint working relationships with local authorities and schools and to share information about care leavers due to students attending college in their locality. They also provide a route to higher education through which care leavers frequently enter HE. Therefore, rolling out the BQM across FE and HE should improve the level of information, advice and guidance to aspiring pupils.

What is the future for the Buttle UK Quality Mark?

5.17 The fact that 56% of HEIs have acquired the BQM since its start in 2006 is a significant achievement, and there is a good level of support for the agenda across the four nations. However, evidence indicates varying levels of support from universities for care leavers. Therefore, universities with the BQM who are not currently delivering exemplary levels of support could be challenged and supported to improve their support to ensure it is firmly embedded in the culture of institutions.

5.18 It is worth highlighting a point made by an expert that shows significant support for Buttle UK and the work they do for care leavers.

“I am personally enthusiastic about the Quality Mark for two reasons. First, it signals to applicants that they should expect understanding of their circumstances and support, such as scholarships and access to year-round accommodation. Second, it has been responsible for raising awareness in the sector more generally and developing a critical mass of support. An institution can be supportive without the quality mark but I think at this stage in our response as a sector, critical mass is vital.”

(Dr. Graham Connelly, CELCIS).\(^{39}\)

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38 See http://www.holyrood.com/2013/01/more-effort-needed-to-widen-access-for-care-leavers/
However, this research would conclude that evidence of critical mass in terms of students experiencing consistent levels of support across the UK, has not been achieved. Therefore, it concludes with a series of recommendations to ensure support for care leaver students continues to improve.

Recommendations

5.20 Key recommendations coming from the research include the following:

Universities

5.21 Students have reported variations in the support received on application and when attending university. To improve levels of support, it is recommended that all universities:

I. Become accredited with the BQM and actively aim to develop exemplary practice.
II. Seek to embed the care leavers’ agenda within institutional culture and practice with a focus on securing support among senior management.
III. Review the effectiveness of promotional activity to students previously in care to ensure they know about and have access to the designated member of staff.
IV. Develop contact arrangements with students previously in care to ensure they are invited to seek support throughout their studies, not just during the initial “settling in” period.
V. Examine the support needs (particularly financial needs) of mature students and postgraduate students previously in care and develop support services accordingly.
VI. Ensure personal support offered to students previously in care is tailored to their unique circumstances, for example reviewing support available around the holiday periods.

Local authorities and HSC Trusts

5.22 This research identified gaps in support for care leavers studying in HE from local authorities and HSC Trusts. To address this, the following recommendations should be considered:

I. Local authorities and HSC Trusts have a range of legal duties to care leavers in higher education but also the discretionary powers to offer a much greater level of support. Directors for Children’s Services should aim to raise the level of support on offer to care leavers well above the statutory minimum, aiming to match care leavers’ needs and expectations.
II. Directors of Children’s Services (and their equivalents) should review their organisation’s approach to supporting looked after children and care leavers aspiring to HE and consider nominating a dedicated lead to ensure that all relevant professionals (for example foster carers, designated teachers, virtual school heads and their equivalents) know about the BQM and the support universities make available for care leavers.
III. Professionals working with looked after children and care leavers to support their education (for example foster carers, dedicated teachers, virtual school heads and their equivalents) should promote the dedicated support available to care leavers in universities among young people who could benefit and inform them about the BQM.

Buttle UK

5.23 This research has also identified areas where Buttle UK can develop its practice to facilitate improved support. Recommendations for Buttle UK include:

I. Work with strategic bodies in the children’s social care sector (such as the national Local Government Associations) to encourage a review of local authorities’ support to looked after children and care leavers aspiring to HE.
II. Facilitate partnerships between universities that hold the BQM and FE colleges joining the scheme to enable better transitions between FE and HE.
III. Develop support and guidance for BQM institutions to help them achieve and “exemplary” standard of support for students previously in care.
IV. Consider developing minimum standards for BQM holders detailing expectations about the information universities make available to applicants and students from a care background.
V. Continue to survey student care leavers at regular periods to develop comparable data on levels of support and impact.
• **Widening Participation**: “widening participation addresses the large discrepancies in the take-up of Higher Education opportunities between different social groups” (Higher Education Funding Council). Widening participation is used here as a generic term to include Widening Participation and Widening Access.

• **Office For Fair Access**: the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) is an independent public body that helps safeguard and promote fair access to Higher Education in England.

• **Access Agreements**: an access agreement sets out a university’s or college’s fee limits and the access measures it intends to put in place such as outreach work and financial support. Any university or college that wants to charge higher tuition fees for home/EU undergraduates, and/or postgraduates on PGCE or initial teacher training courses must have an access agreement approved by the Director of Fair Access. In Scotland, the equivalent documents are called Outcome Agreements.

• **Looked after child / children**: The term ‘looked after children and young people’ is generally used to mean those looked after by the state, according to relevant national legislation which differs between England, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. This includes those who are subject to a care order or temporarily classed as looked after on a planned basis for short breaks or respite care. The term is also used to describe ‘accommodated’ children and young people who are looked after on a voluntary basis at the request of, or by agreement with, their parents.

• **Care leaver**: a care leaver is someone who has previously been a looked after child. Some universities have additional criteria for establishing which students they will support under the quality mark: some will consider all students with a background in care, whereas other universities consider only those aged 25 or below.

• **Looked After Education Services**: a team responsible for improving the educational progress and attainment of children looked after by that authority.

• **A Pathway Plan**: a document drawn up by the responsible local authority / Health and Social Care Trust with the Student Care Leaver to agree the support needs of the Student Care Leaver when the local authority/Health and Social Care Trust ceases to look after that Student Care Leaver.

• **Pathway Plan / Personal Learning Plan**: a plan drawn up by the responsible local authority or Health and Social Care Trust with the care leaver that sets out support arrangements for them as they progress to FE or HE.

• **Pre and post 92 universities**: The term “post 92 universities” refers to institutions that were given the title of “university” as a result of the Further and Higher Education Act 1992. These include institutions that were previously polytechnics or HE colleges. The term “pre 1992 universities” refers to universities already using the title “university” before the 1992 Act.

• **Russell Group universities**: This term refers to an Association of 24 British research universities formed in 1994 that aims to lead research in the UK and attract the best staff and students to its member institutions.

GLOSSARY

40 Office For Fair Access (http://www.offa.org.uk/access-agreements)