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Circular

Widening Access: Looked After Children and Care Leavers

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To: Heads of higher education institutions in Wales
Principals of directly-funded further education colleges in
Wales
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This circular provides information on higher education institutions' progress in supporting looked after children (LAC) and care leavers, including examples of effective practice.

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Introduction

1. This circular provides information on higher education institutions' progress in supporting looked after children (LAC) and care leavers, including examples of effective practice from Wales and across the UK.
2. This circular should be read in conjunction with The Frank Buttle Trust *Going to University from Care* report recommendations:
[www.buttletrust.org/research/by_degrees - from care to university](http://www.buttletrust.org/research/by_degrees_-_from_care_to_university).
3. In referring to looked after children and care leavers we include learners of all ages, recognising that for many care leavers they may not be ready to consider higher-level study, on a full- or part-time basis, until later in life.
4. We recognise that, currently, the number of care leavers progressing to higher education is small. However, we consider that LAC/care leaver policy development, including the dissemination of effective practice and collaborative activity will produce benefits for all students, particularly those under-represented in higher education.
5. Most HEIs in Wales have made substantial progress in developing support for looked after children and care leavers since the Frank Buttle Quality Mark for Care Leavers in Higher Education was established in 2006/07. We commend the sector for its response and we anticipate that this circular will provide the opportunity for HEIs to reflect on their progress to date and examine whether, and if so what, more should be done on an institutional and sector-wide basis.
6. We will know that we have an effective support network for looked after children and care leavers of all ages when:
 - a. All HEIs in Wales have achieved and retained the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark for Care Leavers in HE;
 - b. HEIs have tried and tested support mechanisms which deliver effective relationships with looked after children, care leavers and their stakeholders within their region and beyond;
 - c. HEIs can provide an effective and coordinated response to supporting LAC/care leavers to enter and progress through higher education and into employment, further study or training;
 - d. HEIs can confidently report their effectiveness based on confidential, robust internal tracking and monitoring data;
 - e. Progression rates to HE and achievement in HE approach those for those without a care leaver background.

Background

7. 'The proportion of children in care obtaining five 'good' GCSE passes is only 11 per cent, compared with 61% of all children. 47% of girls and 38% of boys now continue into higher education. Estimates of the number of care leavers

going to university vary from one to 6% cent.' (Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005).

8. In March 2008, Welsh Assembly Government data on looked after children showed that in Wales' 22 local authorities:
 - a. there were 4,633 looked after children, excluding 174 young people looked after under an agreed series of short-term placements.
 - b. Of these 4,633, 477 young people aged 16 or over ceased being looked after and 46% of these children had at least one GCSE grade A* to G or GNVQ.
 - c. Local authorities were in touch with 93% of care leavers who had been in care on 1 April 2005 and had their 19th birthday in the year ending 31 March 2008, and 49% of these young people were in full or part-time education, training or employment. (Statistics from the Wales Data Unit.)
9. HEFCW's remit letters (2006-07, 2007-08 and 2009-10) included specific references to the needs of care leavers accessing higher education. As a result, we commissioned Arad Consulting to include care leavers in their evaluation of widening access and the Reaching Wider Initiative. The Arad Consulting evaluation outcomes informed our understanding of LAC/care leaver needs in higher education. The remit letters extracts and Arad evaluation references to care leavers are attached as **Annex A**.
10. Responding to our remit letter requests and the evaluation outcomes, we encouraged HEIs and Reaching Wider Partnerships to adopt the recommendations from the *Going to University from Care report* by the Frank Buttle Trust (2004).
([www.buttletrust.org/research/by_degrees - from care to university](http://www.buttletrust.org/research/by_degrees_-_from_care_to_university))
11. In December 2007, working closely with the Frank Buttle Trust, we hosted the Welsh launch of the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark for Care Leavers in Higher Education and, in November 2008, with the Trust, we held a best practice dissemination conference to report progress with this key agenda and provide an opportunity to raise the profile of institutions' work.
12. We submitted a report to the Minister on the sector's progress on working with looked after children and care leavers in December 2007. In it we recommended that all HEIs who had not already done so, should consider achieving the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark for Care Leavers in Higher Education and we reported this to institutions in the widening access annual monitoring statement feedback, January 2008.
13. We have also taken account of the Widening Access Committee's discussions and recommendations (meetings: October 2006, February 2008) to enable the sector to increase its support LAC/care leavers. In addition, we

have included advice on supporting care leavers in our widening access/Reaching Wider circulars.

The Current Position

14. The Frank Buttle Trust confirmed in June 2009 that of a total of 154 HEIs in the UK, 54 hold the Quality Mark. The Trust is engaged in application discussions with another 46.
15. Eight of the 54 UK Quality Mark holders are Welsh HEIs: Aberystwyth, Bangor, Cardiff, Glamorgan, Glyndŵr, Swansea, Swansea Metropolitan and UWIC. One Welsh further education college (Coleg Sir Gâr) has also achieved the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark for Care Leavers in Higher Education.
16. To ensure that we continue to make progress in supporting the sector to meet the needs of care leavers, our corporate strategy and operational plan 2008-11 includes an action to:

Take steps to encourage more institutions to work with the Buttle Trust towards gaining the Quality Mark for Care Leavers, and work with the sector to develop guidance on higher education and care leavers.

Developing Work with Looked After Children and Care Leavers

17. The Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark for Care Leavers in higher education demonstrates institutions' commitment to work with care leavers. We would strongly recommend that institutions that have not done so consider how they might most effectively respond to the needs of LAC/care leavers as they progress to and through higher education. Following this assessment we would like to see all institutions make progress towards gaining the Quality Mark by **December 2009**.

Collaborative Working

18. As all institutions are active Reaching Wider (RW) Partnership members they may also wish to take a regional approach to working with LAC/care leavers. Most RW Partnerships have made links rapidly with care teams and other care leaver stakeholders as well as developing targeted activities for LAC/care leavers. In addition, they provide academic and financial information and guidance on higher education opportunities for young people, carers and local authority care teams. Therefore, the Partnerships are well- placed to align their own provision with appropriate institutional widening access provision, thus avoiding duplication, adding value and sharing good practice.
19. As RW Partnerships' members include HEIs, FEIs, the third sector, Careers Wales and other organisations that work with LAC/care leavers, the Partnerships are ideally placed to provide an effective regional coordination

role on behalf of all FEIs and HEIs. This cross-sector working is particularly relevant in the context of implementing the Welsh Assembly Government's *Transforming Education and Training policy*.

20. The Frank Buttle Trust is considering developing a Quality Mark for the further education sector, and RW Partnerships could support and add value to regional FEIs' Quality Mark applications to the Trust.
21. Within HEIs, the involvement of Student Service departments is key to many aspects of support for LAC/care leavers from pre-entry to graduation. In some HEIs Student Services Managers have led the work to obtain and implement the Frank Buttle Trust Quality Mark for Care Leavers in HE. The Welsh Association for Managers of Student Services in Higher Education (AMOSSHE) is, therefore, a useful source of current policy and practice.

Supporting LAC/Care Leavers into and through Higher Education

22. Institutions may want to consider the extent to which *all* institutional policies and procedures take account of the needs of care leavers. These policies might cover, for example: school compacts; widening access and Reaching Wider targeted activities; equality and diversity impact assessments; admissions and retention strategies; bursary and scholarship opportunities; fee waiver plans; flexible fee plans; and part-time student funding (through the Graham Review allocation).
23. Institutions that have gained the Quality Mark will also want to ensure that this achievement is marketed in all appropriate publicity for full- and part-time students, and included in web-based information.
24. The UCAS 'tick box' for care leavers has been in place for only one complete admissions cycle (2008/09 entry). In this first year, many HEIs reported that a large number of applicants appeared to have ticked this box without fully understanding what it meant. However, for 2009/10 entry the tick box explanatory text has been refined. It is anticipated that data gathered from this box will enable HEIs to begin to benchmark care leaver numbers, and in particular, make contact with care leavers prior to entry to discuss any special support requirements they may have or anticipate.
25. LAC/care leavers' support arrangements, of course, will need to be adapted to individual and local circumstances. A structured support package might include pre-entry and post-entry level mentoring or other skills development activities. It might also provide a designated LAC/care leaver staff member to provide academic guidance and signpost care leavers to appropriate additional support or guidance. Institutions may wish to consider whether their support packages for mature and/or part-time care leavers are reasonable and well publicised.
26. The offer of twelve-month accommodation contracts in suitable housing would often be beneficial to care leavers, as would dedicated bursaries,

scholarships and other financial support. Help in identifying and drawing down available support and accommodation at key points in the student lifecycle may be critical to academic success and personal wellbeing.

27. In order to maximise the support available, institutions may want to review protocols for agreeing whether, and if so how, they share care leaver information, whilst respecting confidentiality. For some, such processes already exist, while others will need to develop or formalise their own. Institutions will want to test the robustness of their processes to ensure that, once obtained, they retain the Quality Mark status after the first year.

Monitoring and Tracking

28. UCAS applicants can choose to inform institutions of their care background prior to entry. A Frank Buttle Trust survey suggests that a significant percentage (up to 70%) of care leavers might be willing to disclose this information. However, institutions will want to consider how they might provide the opportunity for self-disclosure by part-time, work based learning and other care leavers. Accompanying application guidance could also highlight whether specific financial and other support was available to care leavers.
29. Institutions should monitor the take up of dedicated care leaver bursaries and ensure that specific financial support is widely and appropriately publicised.
30. Robust care leaver data collection and monitoring would provide a meaningful dataset that institutions should use to benchmark their progress and inform wider institutional policy and practices.

Staff Development

31. Institutions and RW Partnerships may want to consider including the support of looked after children and care leavers within staff development and CPD programmes. This 'in-reach' provision can encourage cross-institution working, provide examples of best practice and raise awareness of the generic and specific issues faced by care leavers.

Examples of Effective Practice

32. Examples of effective practice can be found in all four nations of the UK and internationally. The examples provided in this paper are indicative rather than exhaustive and are not intended to imply that other work of equal quality is also being developed.
33. The *Young People in Public Care: pathways to education in Europe* (YIPEE) project brings together and studies five EU countries – Denmark, Hungary, Spain, Sweden and the UK and aims to increase knowledge of the post-compulsory education of young people who have been in public care as

children. The research looks at the current situation, to get an understanding of the social, political, economic and personal factors that help or restrict participation in further or higher education for LAC/care leavers. The Framework 7 Research Programme of the European Union funds the research project and further information can be found at:

www.tcru.ioe.ac.uk/yippee.

34. The UK government published for England *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (2004): www.everychildmatters.gov.uk.
35. The July 2007 ActiononAccess bulletin (issue 42) provides some information on English HEIs' widening access work with LAC/care leavers (www.actiononaccess.org).
36. The Scottish Government has published *These Are Our Bairns: a guide for community planning partnerships on being a good corporate parent* (2008) available at: www.scotland.gov.uk/laceducationaloutcomes.
37. The Welsh Assembly Government has published *Towards a Stable Life and Brighter Future* (2007).
38. We consider the following to be some examples of innovative or effective practice in working with care leavers in Wales, while at the same time recognising that there will also be individual support requirements which might require other or original solutions:

Pre-entry

- Ensuring that care leavers are targeted for inclusion in widening access schemes provided both by the University and by other partners (Reaching Wider);
- including criteria on LAC/care leavers' background in WA/RW Partnerships' activity eligibility criteria to raise awareness with teachers, community groups and other key stakeholders;
- Ensuring that care leavers in post 16 education are paired with a trained undergraduate student mentor;
- Liaising with school staff to provide additional support in completing UCAS applications and preparing for interviews;
- Work with foster carers, voluntary sector groups and staff within care settings to raise awareness of HE opportunities;
- Work with Further Education Colleges to target and provide learning and progression opportunities for care leavers undertaking year 12 and 13 studies and those returning to learning;
- Ensure that costs associated with travel and subsistence to activities/events are not a barrier to participation.

Entry

- Nominate a member of Student Services to act as a 'problem solver' (including a signposting function for all pastoral, financial, practical and academic issues);

- Having gained permission, share with the relevant admissions tutors the names of participants in University pre-entry schemes who submit applications to the university;
- Invite care leavers to a support/ transition meeting. The meeting could include the care leaver, their local authority Looked After Children Team member, the university's identified mentor for care leavers, a representative of the residences division, and a representative from the academic school which the student will be joining;
- Provide care leavers with additional financial support paid alongside the university bursary. Funding could be made available from flexible fee income bursaries, hardship funds, etc.
- Provide 'peer guide' support at induction and for the first few weeks of term or longer if appropriate.

Outreach

- Make contact with LAC Teams to raise awareness of the support provided by the University;
- Work in partnership with Local Authorities and Trusts in order to make information about HE available, relevant and accessible prior to entry;
- Establish an annual meeting with Social Services to look ahead at new applicants and to review the progress of the target group within the University;
- Work with the Local Authority to ensure that support for HE entry is built into individual Pathway Plans where appropriate.

HEI Processes and Procedures

- Establish a champion who will work collaboratively across the University and is responsible for the implementation of the institution's Care Leaver Action Plan;
- Establish an internal working group with representatives from a range of relevant services from across the institution to monitor the Plan and produce an annual report;
- Share best practice on working with LAC/care leavers between, departments, HEIs and Partnerships;
- Identify care leavers as a specific target group in Widening Access and other institutional strategies and policies;
- Develop a webpage explaining the support available to care leavers and giving a contact email address for further information;
- Flag applications from care leavers and, using agreed protocols, share with the relevant admissions tutors and the staff mentor for care leavers to ensure that appropriate advice and support can be put in place;
- Ensure that care leavers have priority for university accommodation with a commitment to provide appropriate all year round accommodation for the full duration of the course if required and appropriate;
- Ensure that care leavers circumstances are dealt with positively within the processes related to scholarship or bursary provision and that they are not unnecessarily precluded by application deadlines;

- Ensure that care leavers are prioritised for Financial Contingency Funds and any other relevant sources of funding;
- Ensure that care leavers are a designated group for receipt of fee plan bursaries/part-time support (from Graham review funding) etc.;
- Ensure that admissions and other key staff are appropriately trained to support care leavers;
- Provide advice and guidance on course completion including further targeted bursary support for postgraduate study;
- Monitor applications and the admissions process;
- Agree protocols for sharing information about individual care leavers between the care leaver, University staff and partners;
- Collect feedback from care leavers.

HEFCW 2006-07 and 2007-08 Remit Letters Extracts and Arad Evaluation References to Care Leavers

HEFCW's 2006-07 Remit Letter

'I will expect this advice [on maintaining progress towards progressively opening HE opportunities to all parts of society] to include whether further specific steps should be taken to reflect the particular circumstances of young people entering HE having been in care.'

HEFCW's 2007-08 Remit Letter

'I was pleased that the Council responded to the remit to look into the needs of **care leavers** within the widening access context last year. I would like care leavers to continue to be given due attention, alongside other disadvantaged groups. I would like HEFCW to encourage more institutions to work with the Buttle Trust towards gaining the Quality Mark for Care Leavers and to keep me updated on institutions' progress.'

HEFCW's 2009-10 Remit Letter

'I would also like the Council to engage appropriately in the implementation of the Children and Young People Act 2008 in Wales and contribute in the planned Assembly Government consultation on a strategy for vulnerable children in the Spring, with a focus on children in care, on the edge of care and care leavers.'

Arad Consulting Recommendations Relating to Young People Entering Higher Education from a Care Background

Recommendation 12: All higher education institutions in Wales should strongly consider adopting the 'Going to University from Care' recommendations outlined by the Frank Buttle Trust. **Lead:** All HE institutions

Recommendation 13: Further research, reviews and dissemination of good practice nationally and internationally is required in order to gain an understanding of how multi-agency partnerships can be formed to work collaboratively to address the needs of young people entering HE from a care background. **Lead:** Reaching Wider Partnerships and individual HEIs

Recommendation 14: Further awareness raising and staff development is also required across all higher and further education institutions and colleges across Wales in order to ensure that staff are aware of the specific needs of people from a background of care and equipped with the knowledge and skills to address them. **Lead:** HEFCW & individual HEI/FEI

Recommendation 15: Institutions and Reaching Wider Partnerships should work with relevant regional and national care agencies to ensure that optimum

support is offered to students and that this support is consistent both during and outside term-time. Furthermore, efforts should be taken to ensure that relevant agencies continue to offer equivalent support to students from a care background. **Lead:** HEIs and Reaching Wider Partnerships

Recommendation 16: HEIs, and FEIs providing higher education, should raise awareness of and support students with a care background to obtain the range of additional support available and introduce systems that record and monitor information on this cohort of students. **Lead:** HEIs