Plymouth Marjon University Care Experienced Students Support Plan

# 1. Introduction

Plymouth Marjon University recognises the benefits that a diverse population of students and staff brings to the student experience. Whilst we develop our policy and practice across the University’s work to reflect this, we are aware that for some underrepresented groups of students it is necessary to clearly define the support in place for them. This policy is therefore designed to support the educational achievement and welfare of particularly underrepresented groups of students at Plymouth Marjon University.

# 2. Commitment statement

*“Our students often describe themselves as ‘the Marjon family’. They say what sets them apart from other universities is that they can all know each other and can have a very fulfilling experience of belonging in our exceptionally friendly and personal learning community.*

*We are dedicated to ensuring that the Marjon community is genuinely inclusive as a rich and rewarding opportunity for all, irrespective of social background, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, subject being studied, age group, faith identity or any other characteristics that mark us out from one another. This means that we are absolutely committed to Marjon being a place of authentic belonging for every care leaver who comes to us to study for any foundation, undergraduate or post-graduate degree, as well as being a safe and rewarding space for personal development and growth.*

*That’s why I applaud our new Care Leavers Plan as a strategic and heartfelt initiative to ensure no stone is unturned, and to ensure that Marjon continues to work hard at being a welcoming, supportive, inspiring, empowering and very special environment in which every care leaver finds their place to belong and their very own opportunities for personal growth and success, both in their degree, their wider student experience and their life opportunities”.*

**Professor Rob Warner, Vice Chancellor, 12th October 2020**

**Endorsed by Lauren Edwards, President of Marjon Student’s Union, 12th October 2020**

# 3. Definitions

In England, the official care leaving age is 18, although young people can leave care from the age of 16, at which point they are designated care leavers. Local authorities have responsibility for care leavers until the age of 21, or 25 if they are in full time education or have a disability. Young care leavers should receive the support of a personal advisor until they are 25.

Although we recognise care leavers students are a distinct group, this Plan would also benefit a range of other potentially vulnerable and/or underrepresented groups of students, including:

* Young people leaving care;
* Older students who are care experienced;
* Students subject to care plans (but living with family member);
* Students estranged from their families;
* Young carers;
* Students with caring responsibilities (excluding parental responsibilities);
* Those seeking leave to remain in the UK.

Therefore, although throughout this plan we refer to ‘care leavers’ we should recognise the potential for positive impact for all of these groups.

# 4. Why is this plan necessary?

The number of children in local authority care has been increasing nationally since 2008. The Local Government Association has stated that this has now reached a 10-year high (Webb, 2020). It is thought that the step-change here may be caused by several changes made within the social care system and in safeguarding procedures as a result of tragic death of Peter Connelly, ‘Baby P’, in 2007. Due to the changes in the social care system in this time frame, we may expect an increase in the number of applicants to HE who are care experienced within the next five years.

Since 2008 UCAS application forms have included a field for self-disclosure of time spent in care, which every HE institution has a responsibility to respond to. We understand that students within these groups are more likely to face unique challenges and require unique support in relation to HE progression. Jackson & Ajayi (2007) acknowledge that with only 6% of care leavers continuing to HE in comparison to 39% of the general school leaver population, it is an exceptional achievement for a young person in care to go to university.

The 2017-2018 HESA data would suggest that, in their first year, the difference in retention and completion between care-leavers and those students who are not care leavers, is around 20%. Notably, once the first year has been completed, second and third year retention and completion is excellent. O’Neill, Harrison, Fowler and Connelly (2019) cite that the main reason for non-completion is associated with financial complications. Further, Jackson explains that care leavers often struggle with the continuous academic requirements of a HE course and are generally not as well equipped to cope with demands than those students who are not care leavers. It was also specifically highlighted that care leavers are less likely to have informal support networks and social capital.

Findings from a brief literature review by Dr Ian Luke show that Martin & Jackson (2002); Cotton et al. (2014); and Harrison et al. (2018) would indicate that influential factors for a positive experience of HE includes the importance of having someone to encourage educational aspirations, support to explore careers and university life, and advocacy to overcome practical barriers. This highlights that students clearly need support at all points in their learning journey:

* Aspiration raising and information advice and guidance
* Application, selection and transition
* Student success
* Attainment
* Progression

Whilst care leavers and other potentially vulnerable groups may have specific needs, the principles underpinning this plan are based upon the broad definitions of inclusion and the ability for all students to achieve their highest potential. As such, the plan is closely related to the University Growth Plan (2019-2025) – Phase 2: Centred on Student Success - which states:

*“We are absolutely committed to enabling every student to discover and fulfil their potential…A Marjon university education is designed to equip our graduates for successful careers…preparing for student success in the workplace therefore requires not just career readiness by graduation, but the strengthening of transferrable skills and an appetite for lifelong learning”.*

We recognise that currently such students can experience particular difficulties at various times throughout their engagement with the University and are often limited through their individual past experiences. This plan therefore outlines proposals that will enable movement from our current position to a point where we are removing unnecessary barriers for care leavers, and potentially all students.

When universities cannot retain care leavers, it costs the Government greatly to support with accommodation, healthcare and encourage independent living, for example. Therefore, the government has asked HEIs to do more to support care leavers and encourage HEIs to embrace cultural change to inspire more care leavers to enter and stay in HE.

In line with a key strategy to raise attainment in our Access and Participation Plan, this care leaver plan outlines the student journey and details interventions, support packages, amendments to institutional policy and practice, staff development and communications as applicable.

# 5. Principles

Plymouth Marjon University recognises that all parts of society have a responsibility to help care leavers to transition into leading happy and successful lives. A focus has been requested from the OfS to affect cultural change within HEIs on their thinking about and actions to support care leavers. Our Marjon Values are strongly embedded within our structure and cultural DNA and are aligned well with our aims and objectives to provide a positive student experience to all our students, irrespective of their individual characteristics. The institution recognises and is committed to ensuring that a policy framework is in place to guide and govern support for all our care leavers, whilst recognising that in doing so, all our students will benefit from any changes and improvements that we are able to put into place.

# 6. Demonstrating our commitment

This plan recognises that currently such students can experience difficulties at various times throughout their engagement with the University and are often limited through their individual past experiences. This plan therefore outlines proposals that will enable movement from our current position to a point where we are removing unnecessary barriers for these, and potentially all, students, as well as providing equal opportunities for all students to progress and succeed.

This plan details interventions, support packages and amendments to institutional policy and practice, student involvement, staff development, civic engagement, sustainability, and impact.

At Marjon we believe that all students should have equal opportunities, and access to resources and support to thrive at and progress from higher education. We understand that as well as ensuring all care leavers receive quality support during their time in HE, we must also strive to maintain and enhance compliance, improving the quality of support offered as an institution. Thus, we are committed to supporting care leavers by directly working with them and by supporting our staff to do so.

Marjon is committed to supporting care leavers by:

* Supporting care leavers to apply to Marjon;
* Offering practical support;
* Supporting care leavers to develop and grow their own networks and social capital;
* Providing and supporting employment development opportunities which contribute to making good progressions upon completion of their course(s).

Marjon is committed to affecting cultural change as an institution by:

* Undertaking staff training and development;
* Reviewing, monitoring and ensuring progress of care leavers;
* Developing and improving collaborative civic partnerships that will benefit care leavers;
* Reviewing institutional strategies to ensure that the Marjon community is meeting the needs of care leavers;
* Developing bespoke events, interventions and programmes that will enable care leavers to thrive within Marjon and the local Community.

## 6.1. Assessment of current performance

Plymouth Marjon University has championed equality of access to higher education throughout its 180-year history. In accordance with the goals, vision and objectives outlined in the Office for Students Regulatory Framework, the University will continue to work to address social mobility by ensuring that students from all backgrounds can access, succeed in and progress from higher education, and are fully supported in doing so. The University’s Access and Participation Plan 2020 to 2025 is informed by an evidence-led methodology and evaluated activities and interventions and includes identified and applied opportunities for continuous improvement. The University will also continue to nurture and develop strong and sustained working relationships with schools, colleges and other HEIs as a means of ensuring meaningful learner outcomes and sharing best practice. Assessment of current strategies to widen access highlights the University’s on-going success in reducing gaps in entry among students from areas of low higher education participation, low socio-economic backgrounds and care leaver students, as well as students from other recognised underrepresented groups.

## 6.2. Demonstrating our commitment at an institutional level (WP)

To better understand the differences in needs and demands of care leavers, the University’s Outreach team encourages wider participation within the community by raising aspirations and breaking down potential barriers to access HE. The team regularly visits local schools and colleges and facilitates programmes and opportunities using Student Ambassadors. The following are milestones outlined in the access and participation plan, which demonstrate our commitment to care leavers:

• To continue working with Devon Virtual School and Plymouth Virtual Schools, attending their events, offering taster days for them and prioritising places on attainment-raising events for them.

• To extend this relationship to Cornwall and Torbay Virtual Schools.

• To work with care experienced students to develop and publish an action plan for improving care leaver support by July 2020.

1. Current measures for widening access:
* Bespoke campus-based visit events and application support for care leavers/looked after children – one event, plus support for two different students
* Summer School – one event, 33 attendees
* Personal statement workshops – 19 workshops
* Mentoring schemes – two year 12 groups, one year 10 group
* Progression workshops (HE and other options) – 28 workshops
* An onsite bespoke event, ‘Children in Care Awards’ evening – one event
* Sixth form open evenings – eight evenings
* Careers and information, advice and guidance events – 25 sessions
* Campus-based, curriculum-aligned activities including master classes, Discover Days, conferences and careers days to improve subject knowledge – 29 sessions

2) Current measures and considerations for ensuring opportunity and welfare:

* The accommodation team provides care leavers with priority access to guaranteed 365 accommodation throughout the duration of the student’s university cycle.
* Student Support offers year-round mentoring and practical support, for all pre-entry and current students.
* The Futures team offers unlimited year-round careers advice and support for all students. When a student graduates, they will also receive unlimited free employability and career development support.

3) Current measures for improving success:

* Communicating significant bursary to students
* Handshake introduction from Student Support to Futures Team
* Personal development tutors (PDT) are aware when they have a care leaver in their group.
* The Futures Team’s guidance for PDTs requests they monitor care leavers more closely to check their in-class performance.

4) Current measures for improving progression:

* Deliver a handshake introduction from Student Support to Futures team and ongoing career support in the final year of study. This will be booked through a PDT session.
* Aim to recruit one Employability Ambassador from a care background by 2021
* Aim to recruit Student Ambassadors from a care experienced background by 2020.
* The Futures Team’s guidance for PDTs requests they monitor care leavers more closely to check their progress and, if needed, signpost them to the appropriate support.

### 6.3. Demonstrating our commitment to student involvement

Student consultations were, and remain, a vital contribution to the access and participation strategy development. We value and adopt a student-led approach and thus student engagement is imperative. The student voice is currently, and proudly, represented comprehensively within the Student’s Union Strategy and the access and participation plan, as well as physically represented at the Board of Governors, MSU Board of Governors, Senate, respected clubs and societies, and as Course Representatives and members of the Student Experience Council. We acknowledge that these strategies and meeting boards are not necessarily commonly known to the wider population of students, nor referred to within their own personal, social and academic communities. Thus, we are dedicated to continuing to listen and embed the students’ voices within our institutional strategic developments, as well as introducing physical and visual demonstrations which outline exactly how the students’ voices are being presented and listened to across all levels of the University.

## 6.4. Demonstrating our commitment to civic engagement

Cities are experimental grounds for civil society. Through innovative strategies and communication, cities can help nurture the conditions for civic engagement to excel. Therefore, Plymouth Marjon University is currently working towards a collaborative partnership with Plymouth City Council. By increasing interactions with residents, companies and organisations, we are hopeful that we can contribute towards growth and development within the city and provide new and exciting opportunities for our student body. This partnered strategy will outline the benefits for the University and Plymouth City Council. Plymouth Marjon University is dedicated to demonstrating our commitment to civic engagement for care leavers, as well as other underrepresented groups and the whole student body, within the following key categories:

**i) Local authority**

The Student Support team works closely with Local Authorities (LA) providing support for Care Leavers aged 25 and under, who are looking to continue their education. Many students are entitled to an Adviser, a pathway plan, financial support, and help with accommodation fees and appropriate travel costs. In some cases, this applies even if there is a gap between leaving care and returning to education. The LA can also offer a one-off Care Leavers HE Bursary of £2,000 paid in instalments in each September of the course. Plymouth Marjon also currently offers accommodation, welfare and financial support to all care leaver students, and we are dedicated to working in collaboration with the LA to maintain updated, accurate and quality support, to protect and make a difference to, and provide equal access and opportunities for, our care leaver students.

**ii) Accommodation providers**

All care leaver students are guaranteed on-campus 365 accommodation across all three years of study. The MSU has good relationships with local accommodation providers around Plymouth, therefore if a student does not want to be allocated a room on campus, the MSU will provide alternative accommodation options for them. Most external student accommodation providers require a guarantor, and we understand that this requirement could be a barrier for care leavers in particular to secure accommodation. With the acknowledgement that students who have been in care may have been subject to adverse environments, we are dedicated to working closely with our accommodation providers to safeguard and allow equal opportunity for students to thrive, learn and live in a safe and secure environment.

**iii) Employers**

Leaving university is not an isolated event; it is a process which we prepare our students for as best as we can. The Futures Team, who are both virtual and on campus, offers unlimited employment support for all students, which helps them navigate the complicated world of job hunting. Alongside job searching support, the Futures Team help to build CVs, offer placement and voluntary hour work opportunities, interview practice (including for online interviews), and interactive activities which build self-confidence. The employment team are educated on the barriers care leavers may experience, and can consider needs and demands, whilst getting to know their interests, so they can find the right jobs for them. We understand that finding a first job after university can be difficult and throughout your lifetime you can change career paths, therefore Marjon are committed to supporting all students from graduation throughout their lifetime.

We recognise that preparing for and attending a job interview can be a daunting process for most people, and this factor alone can be a restriction to performance on the day. Therefore, Marjon is dedicated to developing a networking activity where students across all schools will have the opportunity to meet working professionals within their desired field of employment. These activities will aim to reduce the anxiety of meeting new people and build self-confidence when talking about personal goals and ambitions.

As well as networking and interactive personal development activities, the student recruitment and outreach team recruits Student Ambassadors to work for the University on applicant and open days, and at times they assist on UCAS fairs and attend school visits as part of their widening participation strategy. Marjon’s student ambassador scheme actively encourages and supports applications from underrepresented groups, as well as maintains continued mentoring throughout. We recognise that students from a care background may not have been able to hold part-time jobs before, but we do not look to employ a ‘finished product’. Instead we adopted a developmental programme by which we offer opportunities to those who will receive the maximum benefits from being a student ambassador; social and interpersonal skills, listening and communication, building self-confidence and influencing skills and teamwork, for example.

**IV) Public and third sector services**

To introduce real change within our communities, universities should look to support and facilitate transformation in those services that our student, and wider, population has most contact with, regardless of characteristics; age, socio-economic status or cultural background. These are our public and third sector services: our hospitals, GP surgeries, schools, uniformed services, local government, social services and, often voluntary, community support services. Of which, upon enrolment care leavers, just as with all students, are actively encouraged and physically signposted to all available services. To remove travel and cost barriers, representatives from local services attend the first day of term to allow everyone to register.

Plymouth Marjon is committed to developing close links with public and third sectors across our region, keeping true to our core purpose and values. In relation to teaching and learning, we are working together with public and third sector partners to create and deliver innovative taught programmes with ‘real-world’, practical expertise. In relation to the wider community, we can work collectively with the public and third sector supporting and challenging one another to share knowledge, policy and practice, pushing boundaries to creatively solve problems for the benefit of citizens and society.

## 6.5. Demonstrating our commitment when recognising success

Our students regularly use the phrase “proud to be Marjon” and refer to themselves as part of the “Marjon family”. This inspired the university to start reporting and sharing the stories of students, both current and alumni. By highlighting the different journey’s people have taken pre- and post- studying with us and sharing what makes them proud to be a Marjon student, we have found that this one of a few great ways to show our Marjon, and wider, community how much we value our student body. We are committed to raising awareness of underrepresented groups at Marjon and sharing the successes that students within these groups achieve, despite having to potentially overcome barriers that may stand in their way.

Marjon has a designated care leaver webpage, which clearly highlights the support is on offer to all prospective and current care leaver students. To maintain this progress, we are committed to regularly reviewing this content to ensure the support is accurate, however we are also committed to sharing successes of our care leaver students, as this will raise aspirations for prospective students.

## 6.6. Demonstrating our commitment to sustainability

Plymouth Marjon is committed to producing a support plan which will maintain a high quality of care and continue to offer equal opportunities to all care leavers. By dissecting our internal departmental strategies which address all areas of the student journey; admissions, accommodation, finance, employability and personal tutoring system; we can break down the needs and demands that care leavers may experience at each level of the university. We can then consider these and apply appropriate revisions where necessary, when creating policies. This will also ensure Marjon policies are more inclusive and measured in the future. This is the same of our learning and teaching strategy and Marjon Student’s Union strategic plan.

# 7. Evaluation

Plymouth Marjon University will improve the collection, accuracy and evaluation of care leaver data for both pre-entry students and those on-course. This will require engagement with care leavers and local authorities, will support further sector-wide understanding of the issues facing this group, as well as better prepare and equip Plymouth Marjon professionals to reduce, and prevent, barriers for these students.

# 8. Recommendations

Through consultations with current Undergraduate and Postgraduate Plymouth Marjon University students, as well as OfS reports which document regulatory good practice advice, the below recommendations have been compartmentalised.

***Recommendations already underway or in place at Marjon:***

8.1 To improving the transition process for care leaver students moving from school and/or College to higher education, through a pre-enrolment package/revised resources and communications.

8.2 To ensure that staff are adequately trained and are aware of the needs of care leaver students and are sensitive to their circumstances.

8.3 To provide accommodation to care leavers all year round.

8.4 To challenge any stereotyping or discrimination that care leaver students may face.

***Recommendations we are working towards:***

8.5 To provide care leaver students with budgeting and financial management support (in the best form for that individual; for example, informal meeting with finance and support, or a free online course).

8.6 To ensure that care leaver students have a say in the decisions that affect them and are involved in the various learner voice processes.

8.7 To introduce a formal, but non-intimidating structure of support. This aims to;

8.7.1. To open a dialogue with the student to provide the opportunity to discuss all forms of support available to them. Also, to discuss what support they are entitled to as a care leaver (e.g. their financial aid and payment plan).

8.7.2. To introduce their point of contact. This would provide a better opportunity for that staff member and student to build stronger communication and trusting rapport.

8.7.3. To support care leaver students with good information, advice and guidance to achieve their potential.

8.7.4. To signpost appropriate members of support staff that the student has the potential to come into contact with during their course. This aims to offer a variety of communication channels depending on particular barriers care leavers are more susceptible to facing.

***Additional measures to consider:***

8.8 To commit to a range of support measures to enhance the recruitment, retention, success and progression of care leavers who study with us, including signing up to the Department for Education’s Care Leaver Covenant.

8.9 To explore the possibility of reducing the summer term accommodation charge for care leavers who remain on campus over the summer holidays. This is due to reports that the financial aid care leavers are awarded goes towards accommodation costs, and they must work just in order to live over the summer holidays, compared to non-care leaver peers who are likely to not pay rent or bills throughout the summer break. Non care-leaver peers are often able to purchase new belongings, to work to save up money for the next term, or do not need to work.

8.10 To explore the possibility of allowing earlier access to bursaries in the academic year, with the aim of improving social engagement and experiences. For example, to help fund membership to the Sports Federation, removing a barrier to participation and improving accessibility and inclusivity.

8.11 To explore how we can introduce and encourage care leaver students to sign up to the university mentor scheme, in either a mentor or mentee role. This is with the aim to improve and share knowledge, skills and experiences, and to enhance the overall university experience.

8.12 To consider offering a guaranteed interview for students from care backgrounds that apply for internal job positions at Marjon; subject to their engagement with the Future’s employability team.

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