

# Evaluation of the NNECL Quality Mark

This report evaluates the impact and value of the Quality Mark for students with care experience in further and higher education



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## FOREWORD

**As Co-Chairs of the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL) we are delighted to present the independent evaluation report of the NNECL Quality Mark.**

The report was commissioned in 2024 to assess the impact of the first cohort of university and college recipients of the Quality Mark, focusing on value for money, the impact on institutional attitudes and practice and, most importantly, the impact on progress of students with care experience through further and higher education.

The report by impact research specialists The Lines Between identifies that, since its inception in 2021, the Quality Mark has seen a strong uptake from universities and colleges who are leading the way in their commitment to inclusion and improving practice for students with care experience. For the more than 50 institutions currently taking part, this report evidences the Quality Mark as a valuable resource for review and recognition, and a supportive process for development, continuous improvement and embedding positive change across a breadth of departments and faculties.

Amongst its particular successes, the Quality Mark is both increasing the number of care experienced students accessing further and higher education, but also the number involved in co-creating the system and approach to support. When NNECL was originally established in 2013 as a volunteer network of higher and further education institutions, the aim was to bring together a group of committed practitioners who recognised the need to understand the wider landscape of educational participation for those with care experience. It was also to capture best practice and develop a structured, supportive pathway through the change process required to support the inclusion and success of students with care experience.

Since its formal incorporation as a charity in November 2018, NNECL therefore firstly focused its work on gathering, understanding and improving data on the impact of a background in care. In the wake of the publication of NNECL's data rich research *Moving on UP*, work with HESA led to the introduction of a robust data flag for care experience in 2021. These were key moments – providing for a better understanding of the make-up of the student body, helping providers to tailor support, measure the success of interventions and better understand outcomes.

The development of the Quality Mark was the next step. With funding secured from the UPP Foundation, NNECL ran an initial pilot phase involving seven universities and four FE colleges. Its outcomes - impacted by on-going regulatory change across the sector and the COVID-19 pandemic - resulted in a Quality Mark with a stronger focus on mental health and wellbeing; on guidance and support. The Quality Mark is a significant undertaking, but one which has been carefully designed to be holistic and proportionate, one recognising the unique characteristics of each institution and its provision.

Above all it is a pragmatic and flexible programme. The Quality Mark and its assessors seek an understanding of an institution's current work, the impact of student voice in decision making on care experience policy, and a road map for progressing a strong package of support for care experienced and estranged students. With regularly updated guidance, the Quality Mark supports institutions to develop bespoke plans within a framework

contextualised to reflect the different requirements and policies for each of the UK's four nations.

At its heart, NNECL is about convening and transforming the power of networks to support and empower those with care experience to achieve their full potential. Whether it's our more than 100 members, our National Strategy Group – bringing together regional groups of college and university practitioners - our Quality Mark holder network or, most importantly of all, our Student Voices Network, each play a vital part in helping us shape continuous improvements to best practice support.

In welcoming this report, we would like to thank all those who give their time and share their expertise in support of NNECL. The significant positive impact outlined in this report is a testament to your commitment to those with care experience. Whilst this report represents a great first step, there are still many challenges ahead. Bridging the cliff edges between care, post-16 education and employment requires both integrated support throughout the journey as well as policy change, however with the support of everybody in our network, grant-givers, NNECL Regional Representatives, Quality Mark Assessors, our Trustees and the core NNECL team, we are confident our impact will continue to grow.



Jon Wakeford  
NNECL Co-Chair



Arron Pile  
NNECL Co-Chair

## A QUICK OVERVIEW

### What we know (and don't know) about participation in further and higher education for learners with care experience.

One of the difficulties still surrounding discussions of further and higher education pathways for learners with care experience learners is that we do not have robust and accessible information about who participates or how they fare.

We do know increasing amounts about **higher education**. The Department for Education publishes annual figures<sup>1</sup> for the participation of 'looked after children' and these tell us that 15% entered university by the age of 19 in 2022/23, compared 47% of other young people. The difference remains stark, although the former figure has risen steadily from 9% in 2009/10, affording some grounds for optimism.

However, these figures present a partial picture. Firstly, they relate only to care-experienced learners in very early adulthood, yet we know many will go to university later in life<sup>2</sup>. Secondly, they exclude learners who undertake their higher education outside of universities, for example, through private providers or further education colleges. Thirdly, they also cover only those learners who spent the whole of Year 11 in care – a description that neither equates to the legal definition of 'care leavers', nor captures those who left care earlier in childhood.

This latter point is really important as the circumstances of care experienced learners are almost endlessly diverse. Historically, research has tended to focus only on care leavers, but we increasingly understand that other care experienced learners also face significant challenges in participating in higher education. Indeed, it is generally held that educational outcomes tend to improve the longer a young person remains within the care system<sup>3</sup>. We would therefore expect the pathways for care experienced learners who are not care leavers to be more precarious, on average. This is borne out by recent analysis<sup>4</sup>, participation in higher education was found to be lowest among those young people entering and/or leaving care between 14 and 16.

Looking further into higher education experiences, we currently know relatively little about retention and success rates for care experienced learners. In 2022, the Office for Students published<sup>5</sup> 'experimental data' that suggested they were substantially lower than for other students. Earlier, more detailed, analysis<sup>6</sup> showed that much of these differences could be explained through background factors like entry qualifications. More positively, the demand for postgraduate study appears to be strong for care experienced graduates<sup>7</sup>, although there are concerns about completion rates here too<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03075079.2019.1582014>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Linking-Care-and-Educational-Data-Overview-Report-Nov-2015.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/care-leavers-transition-into-the-labour-market-in-england>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/equality-of-opportunity/effective-practice/care-experienced>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.nnecl.org/resources/23-nnecl-moving-on-up-report>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0305764X.2021.1994922>

<sup>8</sup> <https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/216285>

One of the challenges with trying to better understand outcomes is that useful data are not readily accessible. While we do have the self-declaration data from UCAS forms and university registration forms, we know that these are partial and have lots of errors – many care experienced learners do not want to identify themselves and some people self-identify by mistake. Conversely, the authoritative records for care and universities can be accessed by researchers, but the process is complex, time-consuming and requires a high level of expertise.

The situation in **further education** is even more opaque. There is currently no annual statistical report and no requirement on colleges to systematically collect information about care experienced learners. As with higher education, it is possible to find out more by linking care records and college records, but this has rarely been done. The one recent study<sup>4</sup> engaging with these data suggests that around two-thirds of care experienced young people access further education between the ages of 16 and 21 – a greater proportion than for young people in general. However, many of these are studying courses at Level 1 or below, which may not offer immediate pathways into stable work.

To finish, let us return briefly to the theme of diversity. Around one-quarter of young people in care aged 16 or over currently are ‘unaccompanied asylum-seeking children’<sup>9</sup>. However, we know very little about their educational pathways or outcomes, whether in further education or higher education. The same is also true of care experienced learners who were adopted from care, where the privacy surrounding their educational records makes analysis very difficult, although there is work underway<sup>10</sup>. These particular groups remind us of the importance of looking behind top-level statistics for the more nuanced stories that lay behind them.



Professor Neil Harrison  
University of Exeter

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<sup>9</sup> <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoptions/2024>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.education.ox.ac.uk/rees-centre/project/family-routes-growing-up-in-adoptive-and-special-guardianship-families>



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Background to NNECL and the Quality Mark

NNECL (National Network for the Education of Care Leavers) is a charity which aims to transform educational outcomes for young people with experience of being in care. It seeks to be part of the solution to address the fact that only 15% of the approximately 14,000 young people leaving care each year in England go to university – around three times less than the general population.<sup>1</sup>

Working collaboratively with care system professionals and education practitioners, NNECL's vision is for learners across the UK with care experience, and those who are estranged, to be empowered and supported to achieve their full educational potential. Its mission is to create environments where people with care experience thrive.

To support improvements in universities and colleges, NNECL developed the Quality Mark - a developmental change management process. This award provides evidence of institutions' approach to inclusion and enables them to demonstrate success in their work with students with care experience. Gaining accreditation involves self-assessment and a review by a NNECL Assessor to consider current practice, identify gaps in provision and establish areas for future development.

### Evaluation of the Quality Mark

With the first cohort of Quality Mark recipient institutions completing three years of accreditation, NNECL commissioned an evaluation to explore universities' and colleges' experience of the award's submission process and impacts, and to look at:

- Value for money – exploring whether the Quality Mark is a worthwhile investment of time and resources for institutions
- Impact on institutions – considering the depth and breadth of impact of the Quality Mark on attitudes and practice within institutions
- Impact on students – considering whether changes in practice instigated by the Quality Mark process impacts on students with care experience.

An online survey (Nov 2024) was completed by a range of staff from 12 institutions holding the Quality Mark or currently in the submission process. Interviews with representatives from three institutions gathered data from which case studies were generated.

### Experiences with the Quality Mark

Institutions are motivated to attain the Quality Mark because of a desire to assess current practice and explore opportunities for improvement in working with students with care experience. Common themes included wanting to recognise existing achievements, benchmarking current support, embedding cross-departmental support for students with care experience and increasing their numbers.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.smf.co.uk/invest-in-higher-education-for-care-experienced-and-estranged-students-says-major-new-report/#:~:text=The%20cross%2Dparty%20think%20tank's,options%20and%20chance%20of%20success>

The Quality Mark submission process is a significant undertaking which involves many administrative tasks. However, the resources provided by NNECL to support the process are seen as easy to engage with, helpful and of good quality. Participants are positive about the process, most notably the feedback and support from assessors.

Spreading the Quality Mark workload within an institution helps to ensure that issues relating to students with care experience are taken seriously across diverse departments. This also means that the Quality Mark and what it represents is more likely to be recognised and valued by and across institutions. Overall, the Quality Mark process was seen as being flexible enough to suit the needs of different institutions, supporting them to evaluate the diversity of support they offered.

**Impact of the Quality Mark:** of the seven areas of institutional life explored in Quality Mark submissions, the evaluation found those most influenced by the award were; Plans for continuous improvement, Collaborative and partnership working and Student success. Within these areas, the process had offered an opportunity to reflect on what is being done well, set out areas for improvement and work more productively internally and externally.

The Quality Mark has a multitude of impacts, even for universities and colleges which have previously developed policies and practice relating to students with care experience. Six impact themes and are described below:

**Leadership teams:** increased involvement of leadership teams in policy and practice developments and practical action are consequences of the Quality Mark. Senior staff become more aware, more involved in, and more vocal about issues relating to students with care experience. Where leadership involvement is lower, the scale and size of institutions is offered as a factor, or leadership support is described as evident but limited to endorsing the efforts to attain the Quality Mark.

**Staff teams:** although staff involved in widening participation and outreach are most likely to be involved in developments resulting from the Quality Mark, there is evidence of positive change for staff across a breadth of departments and faculties. The award process encourages greater cross-departmental involvement. Staff members were described as becoming more aware of issues relating to students with care experience and the barriers needing to be addressed. Improvements such as better induction for new staff and aspirations to ensure widespread staff training relating to students with care experience, offered practical examples of ongoing change for staff teams.

**The involvement of students with care experience:** higher levels of involvement by students with care experience are reported as a result of the Quality Mark. As a result students have more routes to influence their institution's work and access direct resources and support. To a slightly lesser extent, students with care experience have a greater voice and impact on policy. Focus groups, working groups, steering groups, 1:1 interviews and surveys are all highlighted as ways in which student involvement had been increased by institutions working towards the Quality Mark.

**Educational outcomes for students with care experience:** evaluation participants mostly agree that the changes to practice resulting from the Quality Mark lead to improved educational outcomes. However, it is acknowledged that this is a challenging area to measure because of the timing of the student cycle, lack of data and complex variables which could affect outcomes.



Institutions describing their development of stronger and more joined-up support for students, in areas such as academic study, personal finance, accommodation and careers shows that the Quality Mark helps to strengthen foundations which offer greater stability for students with care experience. These in turn support students to access and remain in further and higher education, with a greater chance of achieving their educational potential. This resonates strongly with NNECL's mission to create environments where people with care experience thrive.

**Impact on collaboration:** the Quality Mark has a strong influence on collaboration. New or better links with internal colleagues are commonly experienced as are working relationships with external colleagues, partners and other agencies. The Quality Mark gives institutions a reason to communicate with external agencies and colleagues and to develop new communication structures for more joined-up working.

**Impact on student accommodation:** engaging with the Quality Mark supports some institutions with their thinking and policy development on accommodation for students with care experience. Respondents highlight that this area could be further developed and supported if there was more research into the value of accommodation support packages, clear understanding about local authority responsibilities and consideration of the shortfall of support for graduates with care experience.

**In summary,** institutions reflect that they have improved approaches to working with students with care experience in terms of; addressing risks, improving access to higher education and ensuring better opportunities to thrive there, and in enhanced educational outcomes. A clear majority stated that this was fully or partially attributable to the Quality Mark.

Particular successes of being involved in the Quality Mark are highlighted under four themes: opportunities to reflect on existing work, increasing the numbers of students with care experience, creating a more joined-up system and approach and increasing the involvement of students with care experience.

### **Challenges experienced during the Quality Mark process**

The challenges of taking part in the Quality Mark primarily relate to internal issues at institutions; the need for joined-up data systems enabling adequate student tracking, encouraging student participation, policy development and funding to support the implementation of changes highlighted by the Quality Mark. The only challenge described which links back to NNECL is around ensuring assessor availability to maintain momentum in the submissions process.

### **Expectations, value for money and the future**

All of the institutions involved in the evaluation gained what they had hoped for from the Quality Mark and they had used achieving the award as part of their profile-raising. A significant investment of time and resources is required in taking part, but the Quality Mark is generally regarded as providing value for money given the impacts it has on policy and practice.

Further endorsement of the Quality Mark is evident as all of those involved intend to seek reaccreditation to continue to improve, and recommend other institutions access the award's opportunities for benchmarking, improving support, engaging cross- departmental staff, and connecting with a wider network interested in inclusion.

## 1. Introduction

- 1.1. This chapter covers the background to NNECL and the development of the Quality Mark award, before explaining the purpose and methodology of the NNECL Quality Mark evaluation.

### NNECL

- 1.2. NNECL (National Network for the Education of Care Leavers) is a charity aiming to transform educational outcomes for young people from care, estranged or sanctuary seeking backgrounds. Its' vision is for these learners across the UK to be empowered and supported to consider, access and flourish through apprenticeships, further and higher education into fulfilling careers which will sustain them for life.
- 1.3. There are about 14,000 care leavers each year in England, of which 15% go to university. This is around three times less than the general population and NNECL aims to be part of the solution in addressing this difference.
- 1.4. Recognising that the reasons for this are complex and multi-layered, NNECL began its life with a commitment to tackling disadvantages faced by students with care experience in further and higher education and supporting their progression. Originating as a volunteer network in 2013, run by higher education institutions and national organisations, it is now a registered charity with three staff who work collaboratively with education practitioners and care system professionals.
- 1.5. NNECL has an active membership of over 100 organisations which span universities and colleges, foster agencies, local authority leaving care teams, virtual schools and charities. Through this network the charity provides support for a broad community of over 300 practitioners to transform the progression of children in care, care leavers, and those who are estranged, through further and higher education.

### Quality Mark

- 1.6. To support improvements in universities and colleges, NNECL developed a Quality Mark, a developmental change management process. The Quality Mark provides evidence of institutions' approach to inclusion and enables them to demonstrate success among students with care experience and who are estranged. Accreditation involves self- assessment and a review by a NNECL Assessor to consider current practice, identify gaps in provision and establish areas for future development.

### Evaluation

- 1.7. The first cohort of Quality Mark recipient institutions are now completing three years of accreditation. At this timely juncture, NNECL wanted to evaluate the programme and establish how the Quality Mark is improving post-16 educational outcomes for students with care experience.
- 1.8. In autumn 2024, NNECL commissioned The Lines Between to deliver an independent evaluation of the Quality Mark to explore universities' and colleges' experience of the award in terms of the submission process and the impacts experienced, and to look at:

- Value for money – exploring whether the Quality Mark is a worthwhile investment of time and resources for institutions
- Impact on institutions – considering the depth and breadth of impact of the Quality Mark on attitudes and practice within institutions
- Impact on students – considering whether changes in practice instigated by the Quality Mark process impacts on students with care experience.

## **Methodology**

### **1.9. The approach for the evaluation involved:**

- an online survey sent to all institutions holding the Quality Mark or currently in the submission process. 12 completed the survey; and
- interviews with representatives from three institutions identified by NNECL as examples of Quality Mark holders. These semi-structured interviews enabled a significant level of qualitative data to be gathered from which case studies were generated.

## **Reporting**

**1.10.** This report presents an analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data collected from the survey along with three case studies. The report includes quotes from evaluation participants which provide context and illustrate findings. Some quotes have been edited to improve readability or protect anonymity, but their meaning has not been altered. The case study content has been approved by those taking part.

**1.11.** Our findings and conclusions are presented over five chapters covering:

- Chapter 2: Profile of participants
- Chapter 3: Undertaking the Quality Mark
- Chapter 4: Impact of the Quality Mark
- Chapter 5: Challenges and development opportunities
- Chapter 6: Conclusions

## 2. History with the Quality Mark

### Evaluation participants

- 2.1. Twelve academic institutions took part in the online survey. Ten respondents were Higher Education (HE) establishments, one was Further Education (FE) and one offered both HE and FE. The three participants in case study interviews were Oldham College, University of Exeter and University of Liverpool.
- 2.2. A range of staff completed the survey, from those involved in widening participation, access and outreach and those in finance and transition roles.

### Length of involvement with the Quality Mark

- 2.3. Most institutions which took part in the survey had two to three years' experience of the Quality Mark. Five had first registered in 2021, four in 2022, one in 2023 and two in 2024. One noted that their more recent engagement in the award process meant that they were less able to provide evidence of impact.

### Number of students with care experience

- 2.4. Seven respondents provided data on the number of students with care experience enrolling at their institution, and six provided data on those withdrawing from studies, during the period 2017/18 – 2023/24. The results are shown in Appendices 1 and 2. There is little consistency in the data; experiences vary by institution. For example, three institutions show substantial increases in numbers of students enrolling over the time period; others show a reduction in the same period. No clear patterns emerge for the years affected by COVID-19.

### Legacy of COVID-19

- 2.5. One third of respondents said that there were remaining impacts from COVID-19 for their learners with care experience which affected them applying or studying, while two thirds said that there were not. Those who described ongoing COVID-19 impacts spoke of students with care experience facing lower attainment and reduced emotional resilience.

*“I think the effects of COVID are long term. It's had a knock-on effect on attainment for all students, which affects those applying to high tariff universities in particular.”*

*“Students from under-represented groups including care leavers are more likely to have been impacted by the COVID pandemic, especially in terms of their education. This may affect the grades they can achieve in their entry qualifications or the support and guidance they receive from school/home.”*

- 2.6. None of the respondents said that COVID-19 had affected the process of developing their Quality Mark submission.

### 3. Experiences with the Quality Mark

3.1. Respondents described their institutions’ motivations for seeking to attain the Quality Mark. Typically, they wanted to assess current practice and explore opportunities for improvement. The common themes were:

- Recognising internal and external work done with students with care experience;
- Reviewing current support and taking the opportunity for a benchmarking process;
- Identifying improvement to services;
- Improving support for care experience students;
- Increasing numbers of students with care experience; and
- Embedding cross-departmental support for students with care experience.

*“To benchmark against best practice and improve our offer.”*

*“We wanted to use the Quality mark process to get more engagement for other teams in the University in offering formal support for these students.”*

*“To develop a set of new actions to drive and embed change across the institution.”*

*“To gain external and internal recognition of the support we provide to care experienced and estranged students.”*

*“To work together with other higher education institutions to provide a better support for care experienced students.”*

3.2. Different elements of the Quality Mark process scored highly; particularly documents for completion and assessment meetings as shown in the two figures below.

| <b>Ease of engagement with Quality Mark process elements</b> | Very easy or easy | Neither easy or difficult | Difficult <sup>2</sup> |
|--|-------------------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| Pre expression of interest (info/guidance document)          | 10                | 1                         | 1                      |
| Expression of interest                                       | 11                |                           | 1                      |
| Initial Meeting / Assessment                                 | 11                | 1                         |                        |
| Progress meetings  | 9                 | 1                         | 2                      |
| Assessor support   | 10                | 1                         | 1                      |
| Submission form  | 7                 | 5                         |                        |
| Assessment   | 10                | 1                         | 1                      |

<sup>2</sup> No respondents chose ‘very difficult’

| Helpfulness : Quality Mark process elements         | Very helpful or helpful | Neither helpful or unhelpful | Unhelpful <sup>3</sup> |
|---|-------------------------|------------------------------|------------------------|
| Pre expression of interest (info/guidance document) | 9                       | 2                            | 1                      |
| Expression of interest                              | 10                      | 1                            | 1                      |
| Initial Meeting / Assessment                        | 11                      | 1                            |                        |
| Progress meetings                                   | 10                      | 1                            | 1                      |
| Assessor support                                    | 9                       | 2                            | 1                      |
| Submission form                                     | 11                      | 1                            |                        |
| Assessment  | 10                      | 1                            | 1                      |

- 3.3. Experiences with support from the assessor were highlighted as helpful, and described as “*incredibly supportive*” and offering “*great guidance*”. The project documentation received favourable comments too. One respondent felt that helpfulness in the process would have been improved by the increased availability of the assessor; they found the process slower than anticipated. Another felt the process might have been more useful to universities with less developed provision as they already had a lot in place.
- 3.4. The quality of the resources to support the Quality Mark submission process also rated positively. A third of respondents did not comment on the webinars or printed resources or could not recall these being part of the process offered to them.

| Quality: Quality Mark support and resources | Excellent or good | Fine | Poor | N/A |
|---|-------------------|------|------|-----|
| Quality of online support and resources     | 8                 | 4    |      |     |
| Quality of printed resources                | 7                 | 2    |      | 3   |
| Quality of contact with assessors           | 7                 | 4    | 1    |     |
| Webinars and events                         | 6                 | 2    |      | 4   |

- 3.5. There was limited use of the Members Area of the NNECL website. Since participating in the Quality Mark, only two respondents had used this to support a query for a student.
- 3.6. Overall, the Quality Mark was seen as being flexible enough to suit the needs of different institutions, supporting them to evaluate the diversity of support they offered. Potential improvements to the Quality Mark process were identified as increased contact with the assessor, and a balance of resources to ensure that Further Education is represented to the same extent as Higher Education.

*“As a large institution we have a number of different areas of the University and we were able to involve them all in the Quality Mark.”*

*“Now that estranged students are combined with students with care experienced for NNECL, it has better met the needs of our institution.”*

*“It [the Quality Mark process] identified small areas for improvement without pushing for unachievable actions.”*

<sup>3</sup> No respondents chose ‘very unhelpful’



## 4. Impact of the Quality Mark

4.1. This section begins with a review of areas most influenced by the Quality Mark process. We then explore impacts relating to six key themes:

- Leadership team;
- Staff team;
- Involvement of students with care experience;
- Educational outcomes of students with care experience;
- Collaboration; and
- Student accommodation.

### Area most influenced by the Quality Mark

4.2. Seven areas of institutional life are explored by the Quality Mark<sup>4</sup> in the submission process. Respondents told us which of these had been most influenced by the Quality Mark. The results are shown below.

| Ranking         | Area most influenced by the Quality Mark |
|-----------------|--|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> | Plans for continuous improvement         |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> | Collaborative and partnership working    |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> | Student success                          |

4.3. The areas where change was most like to have taken place as a result of the Quality Mark were: (i) having an opportunity to reflect on what is being done well, (ii) setting out areas for improvement and (iii) working more productively internally and externally.

4.4. Some comments indicate that certain areas addressed by the Quality Mark were less relevant if an institution had already developed these, or if it felt it had limited ability to effect widescale impact.

*“Having an awareness of our student's situation has been invaluable. Showing what we already do and if we can improve it was good to see. We work closely with our Student Wellbeing and Support services and we have been able to continue this. It has opened our eyes to external opportunities we can join in with.”*

*“I and the other lead member of staff working on the Quality Mark submission work with students pre-entry, so this area was in our direct capacity to influence and change. A member of staff involved in Wellbeing and Student Success also prepared information for the submission, which got them more involved and engaged.”*

*“The Quality Mark has helped us build out a framework and action plan for building continuous improvement. It has also helped us develop a cross-institution steering group that works towards tangible actions.”*

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<sup>4</sup> Culture and Leadership, Plans for Continuous Improvement, Before Students Join, Admissions Process, Student Wellbeing, Student Success, Collaborative and Partnership Working

- 4.5. The Admissions process was the area least likely to have been influenced by the Quality Mark, although three respondents selected this in their top three. Those who said it had not been influenced explained that this was because they already had procedures in place which remained unaffected by the Quality Mark process.

*“We already had a contextual offer for care experienced students and this remains the same.”*

*“Admissions process this is governed by UCAS - we have partnerships to cover advice and guidance with other local institutions.”*

### Impact on leadership teams

- 4.6. Policy, practices and practical action were areas of impact for Leadership Teams which were most likely to have improved. The leadership areas slightly less likely to have been improved related to the monitoring of students with care experience, and course monitoring.

| Impact on Leadership Team  | Strongly agree or agree | Neutral | Disagree <sup>5</sup> | N/A |
|--|-------------------------|---------|-----------------------|-----|
| To increase understanding of issues relating to students with care experience    | 9                       |         | 2                     | 1   |
| To agree on practical action to improve issues for students with care experience | 10                      |         | 1                     | 1   |
| To improve monitoring of the number of students with care experience applying    | 7                       |         | 4                     | 1   |
| To improve on course monitoring  | 7                       |         | 3                     | 2   |
| To improve our policy for students with care experience                          | 10                      |         | 1                     | 1   |
| To improve our practices for students with care experience                       | 10                      |         | 1                     | 1   |

- 4.7. Some respondents gave examples of the Quality Mark influencing the Leadership Team at their institution. These described senior staff being more aware, more involved in, and more vocal about issues relating to students with care experience.

*“There is greater involvement of the Senior Leadership Team and Governor.”*

*“Our Pro Vice Chancellor of Education has advocated for care experienced and estranged students at several university committees, and the Quality Mark added weight to their argument.”*

*“The leadership team's focus has been on improving policy and the support we provide to care experienced students through areas like bursaries and wellbeing provision.”*

<sup>5</sup> No respondents chose ‘strongly disagree’

4.8. Where the Quality Mark had less of an influence on leadership teams, respondents described their view that the process was more valuable for delivery staff. The scale and size of institutions was seen as a reason for a low level of leadership involvement in some places. Other respondents commented that their Senior Leadership Team were already supportive of work with students with care experience or that their role was limited to welcoming and supporting the work towards and achievement of the award.

*“Very little impact on our leadership team, process was much more valuable for delivery staff.”*

*“The leadership team haven’t been directly involved in the Quality Mark process given the size and scale of the University, but they have supported it and welcomed the award.”*

**Impact on staff teams**

4.9. Impact on staff teams is clearly shown in the table below. Staff members in nearly all institutions are becoming more aware of issues relating to students with care experience, leading to a greater focus on these issues and improved communication and action.

| <b>Impact on Staff Team</b>  | Strongly agree or agree | Neutral | Disagree <sup>6</sup> |
|--|-------------------------|---------|-----------------------|
| To increase understanding of issues relating to students with care experience  | 11                      |         | 1                     |
| To consider students with care experience more when decision-making            | 12                      |         |                       |
| To improve communication with students with care experience about their issues | 12                      |         |                       |
| To take practical action to improve issues for students with care experience   | 12                      |         |                       |
| To attend courses/CPD to improve staff practice and understanding              | 10                      |         | 2                     |

4.10. Three themes in the qualitative responses highlighted ways in which staff teams had been most commonly impacted by the Quality Mark:

- Increased awareness of the issues faced by students with care experience and the barriers which need to be addressed;
- Improved communication – improvements made to the induction material for new staff and through updates for teaching staff supporting students with care experience; and
- Further aspirations to improve – intention to implement further training for wider university staff to improve staff practice and understanding.

<sup>6</sup> There were no responses choosing ‘strongly disagree’

*“There is much more awareness of issues faced by students with care experience, in particular, barriers that need to be removed to ensure there is an equal playing field. This includes academic support, access and financial support.”*

- 4.11. When asked for specific examples of the impact on staff teams, examples related to improvements in communication, staff induction and training and increased staff capacity.

**Communication**

*“The process of applying for and reviewing our progress against the Quality Mark led the development of a Care Experienced and Estranged students working group, bringing together colleagues across the institution with both professional and lived experience to drive change.”*

*“The monthly catch ups with the 'care experienced support team' enable staff to increase understanding of issues students face and the support they need across the student life cycle.”*

**Induction and training**

*“Each new member of staff meets with the team responsible for supporting students with care experience - this creates a better understanding of the work that is being carried out in this area.”*

*“The biggest thing is we've created and implemented a training session about supporting care experienced staff, which is open to all University staff. So far we've trained 152 staff members and we continue to deliver these sessions 2-3 times per year.”*

**Staff capacity**

*“We now have designated staff for care experienced and estranged students in support and wellbeing and careers. We have embedded Wellbeing Support for care experienced students with named contacts and drop-in meetings.”*

*“Following the QM process, we made a decision to put more resources towards post entry support and ensuring our care experienced students enrolled at the university were better supported.”*

- 4.12. Two respondents identified that staff were engaged in work with students with care experience already or were making changes so could not be certain about the influence of the Quality Mark, although one of them noted that it *“probably gave some motivation for improvement.”*

**Impact on the involvement of students with care experience**

- 4.13. Most respondents reported that they now had higher levels of involvement by students with care experience. This provides a route for them to influence their institution's work and direct resources and support. There was also a positive impact to a slightly lesser extent on students with care experience having a greater voice and impacting on policy.

| <b>Impact on involvement of students with care experience</b>           | Strongly agree or agree | Neutral | Disagree <sup>7</sup> |
|---|-------------------------|---------|-----------------------|
| To have a greater voice about the issues relating to them               | 9                       |         | 3                     |
| To influence your institution's work with students with care experience | 11                      |         | 1                     |
| To impact on policy about students with care experience                 | 9                       |         | 2                     |
| To impact on support and resources for students with care experience    | 11                      |         | 1                     |

- 4.14. Focus groups, working groups, steering groups, 1:1 interviews and surveys were all highlighted as ways in which the involvement of students with care experience had been increased by the Quality Mark.

*“We have engaged with students in our focus group and also sought their opinions on matters related to them e.g. funding, accommodation etc.”*

*“Set up surveys, 121 appointments and focus groups that help us better understand the experience of students with care experience - through active listening we can learn what needs to be done to make changes that improve that experience.”*

- 4.15. One respondent noted their reason for the Quality Mark not affecting this area of work; *“We only have a small number of students with care experience, they have a good relationship with their named contact who can feed back into policy etc. but on a wider basis we do not target them for comment specifically on general consultation.”*

- 4.16. Some respondents offered evidence of the involvement of students with care experience taking place as a result of improvements made through the Quality Mark.

*“Following the Quality Mark process, we established a steering group for care experienced students. This group then shares feedback from our current care experienced students onto the Widening Participation which influences policy.”*

*“Focus groups with care experienced and estranged students identified the needs of these students, which in turn contributed to the creation of the care experienced and estranged bursary, the accommodation bursary and guarantor support.”*

*“We recently created a video with a student with Care Leaver status to raise awareness across the Uni and publicly speak about the lived experiences for a care experienced student and the positive impact that students of all different backgrounds have in enriching the cultural fabric of the Uni - while acknowledging, for some care experienced students, it's not an easy journey.”*

### **Impacts on educational outcomes for students with care experience**

- 4.17. Ultimately the Quality Mark aims to support institutions to improve practice which will lead to positive impact on the educational outcomes of students with care experience.

<sup>7</sup> There were no responses choosing 'strongly disagree'

Survey respondents mostly agreed that this impact was there and that practice changes made do lead to improved educational outcomes.

| <b>Impact on educational outcomes for students with care experience</b>  | Strongly agree or agree | Disagree <sup>8</sup> |
|--|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| To consider options in further and higher education                      | 8                       | 2                     |
| To better access options in further and higher education                 | 8                       | 2                     |
| To stay in further and higher education                                  | 8                       | 2                     |
| To thrive and achieve their full educational potential                   | 10                      | 0                     |
| To have improved educational outcomes                                    | 9                       | 1                     |
| To thrive and achieve their full educational potential                   | 9                       | 1                     |
| To flourish through further and higher education into fulfilling careers | 9                       | 1                     |

4.18. Although the majority of respondents stated that the Quality Mark’s impact extended to educational outcomes, a number acknowledged that this is challenging to measure because of a range of factors:

- Timing - *“We won’t know the full impact until the end of the student cycle”*
- Lack of data - *“Our team supports students at pre-entry and transition and therefore doesn't hold this information”*
- Complex variables - *“The range of experience that care experienced students have is so broad, evaluating areas like educational outcomes can be challenging.”*
- Other positive factors - *“Our college already provides an aspirational environment and has outstanding academic success – QM influence is less obvious”*

### **Impact on collaboration**

4.19. The Quality Mark has a strong influence on collaboration. New or better links with internal colleagues and partners had been experienced by all but one of the respondents, while two thirds reported that this improvement occurred with external colleagues, partners and other agencies.

4.20. Having a reason to communicate with external agencies and colleagues, organising events for external agencies, and developing new communication structures had all ensured more joined-up working. One respondent described how the Quality Mark gave them the ‘permission’ to take action to link with others.

*“It's good to have the QM to say 'we need to do this because we have the QM'.”*  
*“There is a monthly catch-up meeting with the 'care experienced and estranged support team' which is made up of Widening Participation Targets (pre entry support), support and wellbeing and ResX (provides support to students living in uni halls). We also work closely with funding and financial support and admissions.”*

*“We are working much more closely with Widening Participation, Campus events*

<sup>8</sup> There were no responses choosing ‘neutral’ or ‘strongly disagree’



*team and the pro vice chancellors - this is all due to the Quality Mark.”*

### **Impact on student accommodation**

- 4.21. Some specific accommodation-related changes had occurred as a result of the Quality Mark. Just under half of respondents said that engaging with the Quality Mark had supported their thinking and policy development around student accommodation.

*“The Quality Mark, along with the Stand Alone Pledge, has contributed to the creation of the accommodation bursary which provides support to cover the cost of accommodation for first year students in selected university halls. It also contributed to the introduction of Your Guarantor to support these students with guarantor fees.”*

- 4.22. Respondents highlighted information and support which would help them develop further in this area:

- research into the value of accommodation support packages;
- clear understanding about local authority responsibilities; and
- consideration of the shortfall of support for graduates with care experience.

*“Some more research around benefits of 52-week accommodation and guarantor schemes.”*

*“I think we are doing well here but in general clearer guidance for young people on what support they can expect from their local authority may help them make decisions about accommodation.”*

*“The cliff edge of graduating and finding somewhere to live remains a challenge as once they have graduated, they are no longer our students and it's therefore harder to support them.”*

- 4.23. The opportunity to reflect on current accommodation provision for students with care experience was described as a helpful exercise.

*“We have included considerations for care experienced students in our accommodation provision for many years. The QM process enables us to reflect on our current provision.”*

## Impact Summary

- 4.24. All twelve respondents said that they had an improved approach to working with students with care experience in recent years. Seven described this improvement as 'definite' and five as 'a little'.
- 4.25. The areas where this improved approach was experienced were:
- Addressing risks that may affect students with care experience;
  - Better opportunities for students with care experience to access higher education;
  - Improving opportunities for students with care experience to succeed and thrive in higher education; and
  - Enhanced educational outcomes for students with care experience.
- 4.26. Two said that this change was fully attributable to the Quality Mark and seven that it was partially attributable. The remaining respondent was unsure.
- 4.27. Reflecting on particular successes and highlights of being involved in the Quality Mark, four themes emerged:
- Opportunities to reflect on existing work;
  - Increasing the numbers of students with care experience;
  - Creating a more joined-up system and approach; and
  - Involving students with care experience more and ensuring benefits for them.

*“Our support of students when they enrol has become more targeted through our support and wellbeing team. We have improved our process, procedures and communication with other teams. We have also negotiated gowns and photos to support graduation costs.”*

*“Higher numbers of care experienced students entering, more care experienced students working as Student Ambassadors, better linking up across areas of the University.”*

*“Successes have been the introduction of a Care Experienced and Estranged Bursary and an increase in its value. A bursary to support care experienced students with their 1st year accommodation costs (if in university accommodation) and a guarantor scheme for those choosing to rent from their second year.”*

*“I think we had well developed support in place, developed over a number of years through universities sharing best practice, NNECL, Care Leaver Covenant, - the QM helped us review this and ensure it carries on.”*

## 5. Challenges and development opportunities

### Challenges experienced during the Quality Mark process

5.1. A few challenges for institutions taking part in the Quality Mark were identified. These mostly related to internal systems:

- Data – the need to develop joined-up data systems which enable adequate tracking of students;
- Student involvement – encouraging participation is sometimes difficult;
- Policy development – creating policy to specifically cover students with care experience as opposed to other forms of disadvantage; and
- Funding – securing support to implement changes highlighted by the Quality Mark.

*“We are aware our data systems still need to develop and become more joined up. This can sometimes mean that tracking these students is a very manual and time-consuming process.”*

*“Funding to implement the changes that we want to has been hard to negotiate and with current pressures it can be difficult to maintain at its current level.”*

5.2. The only challenge described which linked back to NNECL was around ensuring assessor availability to maintain momentum in the submissions process.

### Expectations, value for money and the future

5.3. All of the institutions involved in the evaluation had gained what they had hoped for as a result of involvement in the Quality Mark; two respondents said that the process had surpassed their expectations.

5.4. Most respondents had used the achievement of the award as part of their profile-raising, for example through press releases or on their organisational website.

*“I think we had hoped by having a national award it would provide us with a framework to develop our work with care experienced students beyond our widening participation team. This has happened and allowed us to go to senior leaders to get support and buy in to new developments.”*

*“The structure of the QM process and writing the submission was a helpful way of reviewing our work and holding it up to a lens through which we can assess whether we're meeting or exceeding a standard. We have senior leader buy-in for this, but a QM doesn't harm growing the interest and priority of this work and it is a helpful tool to protect this work as we go through various challenges, for example, financial.”*

5.5. The Quality Mark was regarded as providing value for money for all but one respondent. The one respondent who questioned value for money felt that the “lighter touch” reaccreditation process which they had experienced seemed of lower value than the original submission. This respondent qualified this comment by

reflecting *“we do see the wider value of the award for our institution and agree it is worth investing in.”*

5.6. Further endorsement of the Quality Mark was evident as every respondent said that they would recommend it to other institutions, and intended to reapply for the Quality Mark. Common themes on the motivation for reapplying for the Quality Mark included to:

- Retain a focus on work with students with care experience
- Undertake further improvements and continue to progress
- Retain the recognition which comes with the award.

## 6. Conclusions

- 6.1. The NNECL Quality Mark supports universities and colleges to develop policies and practice for students with care experience. Institutions choose to undertake the Quality Mark because of a commitment to inclusion, and because of their desire to improve practice for students with care experience. They consider it a valuable resource for review, recognition, development and improvement and to embed this work more fully in institutional life.
- 6.2. The Quality Mark submission process is seen as a significant undertaking which involves a number of administrative tasks. However, the resources provided by NNECL to support the process are seen as easy to engage with, helpful and good quality. Participants are positive about the process, most notably the feedback and support from assessors.
- 6.3. The main challenges with the Quality Mark stem from institutions' internal systems connected. Barriers include issues with access to data, processes for policy development, or sourcing funding to implement changes highlighted by the Quality Mark.
- 6.4. Involving a number of people in the process spreads the Quality Mark workload and ensures that issues relating to students with care experience are taken seriously across diverse departments. Ultimately it means that the Quality Mark and what it represents is more likely to be recognised and valued by and across institutions.
- 6.5. The Quality Mark has a multitude of impacts, even for universities and colleges which have previously developed policies and practice relating to students with care experience. The areas most likely to be influenced by the Quality Mark are around institutions' plans for continuous improvement and their approach to collaborative and partnership working, both internally and externally.
- 6.6. Although staff involved in widening participation and outreach are most likely to be involved in developments resulting from the Quality Mark, there is evidence of positive change for leadership teams and for staff across a breadth of departments and faculties. This is typically through staff gaining a greater awareness and understanding of issues affecting students with care experience, speaking up for them and being involved in policy and practice change.
- 6.7. Students with care experience now have greater involvement and a stronger presence within institutions with the Quality Mark. Focus groups, steering groups and other opportunities have been established to enable their voice to be heard, leading to better informed action taking place.
- 6.8. The evaluation did not capture data on the impact of the Quality Mark on the educational outcomes for students with care experience, however evaluation participants believe that there is a positive link. Institutions describe the development of stronger and more joined-up support for students, in terms of academic study, personal finance, accommodation and careers. Therefore, the Quality Mark helps to strengthen a broad set of foundations providing greater stability for students with care experience. This in turn supports them to access and remain in further and higher education, with a greater chance of achieving their educational potential.

- 6.9. All participants would recommend other institutions to attain the Quality Mark award. It is seen as a valuable process which has enabled benchmarking, prompted development, supported broad engagement within institutions, and connected them with a wider network interested in inclusion.
- 6.10. A significant investment of time and resources is required by institutions taking part, but the Quality Mark is regarded as providing value for money. Those with experience of the process believe the opportunities to reflect, create more joined-up systems and both increase the numbers of students with care experience while also involving and supporting them better, make the process worthwhile.
- 6.11. There is strong evidence of the Quality Mark contributing to or complementing change at institutions in terms of awareness and attitude as well as policy and practice, and of the award encouraging a greater breadth of cross-departmental involvement.
- 6.12. Universities and colleges reflect that the developments prompted by the Quality Mark provide a stronger foundation of support for students with care experience across all areas of student life, and therefore are likely to impact on their educational outcomes. This resonates strongly with NNECL's mission to create environments where people with care experience thrive.



## Appendix 1. Enrolment data for students with care experience

|   |    |    |    |    |    |    |    | Total      | Average   |
|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|------------|-----------|
| <b>Enrolling in institution (2017 - 2018)</b> | 15 | 13 | 20 | 5  | 6  | 26 |    | <b>85</b>  | <b>14</b> |
| <b>Enrolling in institution (2018 - 2019)</b> | 22 | 11 | 27 | 5  | 6  | 39 |    | <b>110</b> | <b>18</b> |
| <b>Enrolling in institution (2019 - 2020)</b> | 3  | 22 | 12 | 29 | 10 | 11 | 55 | <b>142</b> | <b>20</b> |
| <b>Enrolling in institution (2020 - 2021)</b> | 6  | 36 | 10 | 38 | 10 | 10 | 60 | <b>170</b> | <b>24</b> |
| <b>Enrolling in institution (2021 - 2022)</b> | 9  | 31 | 11 | 75 | 15 | 13 | 63 | <b>217</b> | <b>31</b> |
| <b>Enrolling in institution (2022 - 2023)</b> | 11 | 30 | 12 | 77 | 30 | 11 | 44 | <b>215</b> | <b>31</b> |
| <b>Enrolling in institution (2023 - 2024)</b> | 8  | 55 | 12 | 63 | 25 | 21 | 43 | <b>227</b> | <b>32</b> |
| <b>(n=7)</b>                                  |    |    |    |    |    |    |    |            |           |

## Appendix 2. Withdrawal data for students with care experience

|   |   |   |   |   |     |    | <b>Total</b> | <b>Average</b> |
|---|---|---|---|---|-----|----|--------------|----------------|
| <b>Withdrawing from studies (2017 - 2018)</b> | 1 | 3 | 0 | 0 | N/A |    | <b>4</b>     | <b>1</b>       |
| <b>Withdrawing from studies (2018 - 2019)</b> | 1 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 3   |    | <b>7</b>     | <b>1</b>       |
| <b>Withdrawing from studies (2019 - 2020)</b> | 2 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 2   | 5  | <b>14</b>    | <b>2</b>       |
| <b>Withdrawing from studies (2020 - 2021)</b> | 1 | 1 | 4 | 5 | 0   | 9  | <b>20</b>    | <b>3</b>       |
| <b>Withdrawing from studies (2021 - 2022)</b> | 1 | 0 | 8 | 0 | 5   | 11 | <b>25</b>    | <b>4</b>       |
| <b>Withdrawing from studies (2022 - 2023)</b> | 2 | 0 | 5 | 5 | 3   | 5  | <b>20</b>    | <b>3</b>       |
| <b>Withdrawing from studies (2023 - 2024)</b> | 2 | 0 | 9 | 5 | 1   | 4  | <b>21</b>    | <b>4</b>       |
| <b>(n=6)</b>                                  |   |   |   |   |     |    |              |                |

## Case Study 1 – Oldham College

*“The Quality Mark helped highlight what we were already doing very well, gave us some stretch and challenge, but most importantly opened the door to rolling out our practice across the whole institution.”*

### Background

Oldham College is a technical and professional education college offering 116 different learning programmes including T Levels, Apprenticeships, adult courses and Higher Education courses. All of these are informed through close work with employers and Employer Advisory Groups. Oldham College prides itself on its inclusive and community-based approach for all student populations.

*“We have over 60 languages spoken on our campus, a large number of thriving learners with SEND<sup>9</sup> and over half our learners are from BAME<sup>10</sup> communities. So, we're quite a diverse group and have an open-door policy in terms of offering something for everybody, from entry level right through to post graduate degrees.”*

In this case study, Alan Benvie, Vice Principal and David Littlewood, Designated Safeguarding Lead described their involvement in the college’s submission process for achieving the Quality Mark Award. They explain the college’s support for students with care experience and how working with NNECL and the impact of achieving the Quality Mark. This has brought the college into an important new peer network, helped them reflect on and improve practice across widespread college departments and built an even stronger commitment for improved support and system change for care experienced learners.

### The appeal of the Quality Mark process

Before involvement with NNECL and the Quality Mark the college actively supported students with care experience through their Welfare Team, PEPs<sup>11</sup> with social workers, progress reviews and being linked in with the Virtual Schools to offer bespoke transitions. However this had some limitations in terms of its reach within the college.

*“There were fairly strong practices here in terms of looking after young people in care and care leavers. We were warm and open to people who were disclosing their care experience status and we always took PEPs seriously – they happened in a timely manner and we corralled all the agencies to be there. However, there were fairly isolated and a bit esoteric with only a small group of people directly involved.”*

Work with NNECL brought the college into contact with other institutions involved in similar work, helped it to benchmark and streamline its work and encouraged it to be more multiagency focused.

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<sup>9</sup> Special Educational Needs or Disabilities

<sup>10</sup> Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic

<sup>11</sup> Personal Education Plans

*“What we were doing previously was very localised and primarily working with our immediate local authority areas, but now links have gone much wider. We currently work with 26 local authority areas. It’s given us an opportunity to speak with many other colleges and universities.”*

*“Before the Quality Mark it was almost impossible to know ‘how do we benchmark our practice in working with care experienced learners?’ We already sought learners’ views but wanted a bigger field of view to make sure we weren’t missing any aspect of inclusion or supporting learner success.”*

*“We used the Quality Mark framework and looked at what other colleges and institutions [also going through the assessment process] do differently that could be applicable here and how we could embed the best ideas into our practice. We wanted to ensure the best overall package for learners.*

### **Experience of the Quality Mark process**

At the outset, through internal communications, they made sure there was a heightened awareness that the college was opening itself up to having its practice examined and assessed.

*“You’ve got to be open-minded in the first place to want to do this. People are going to be really looking into what we do. Are we actually doing what we think we should be doing? Are we doing it correctly? We wanted people to look - we wanted to improve our offer.”*

The college was aware that there might be some temporary extra workload while undertaking the Quality Mark. Oldham College established a NNECL Steering Group which still exists.

*“Our NNECL Steering Group was a catalyst to broaden out the Quality Mark work and get everybody across the college involved.”*

*“We reached out to get a range of different functions represented, we have reps from the Quality team, Careers, Bursary, Data/MIS, Curriculum, Welfare, Personal Development.”*

*“Looking at the required tasks individually, it seemed like there was a lot to do, but we got our Steering Group together and it meant we had people to ‘bounce ideas off’ meaning the process wasn’t daunting when we were all looking at it as a team.”*

The college had always planned to have a few people involved in the Quality Mark submission, the scale grew once the criteria and knowledge needed became clear.

*“Implementing the Quality Mark involves covering the whole learner journey. So, for example we needed to fine tune our triage process at enrolment, which involved our Data team... and then we had to train that out to all the triage Officers who help with enrolments. We have an internal methodology for pedagogy called ‘Teaching for*

*Excellence' which includes inclusivity and trauma-informed approaches - we wanted this to run in parallel with the Quality Mark - so the Quality Mark process became part of our teacher education/CPD. It has also got our FE and HE provision to work more closely."*

Involving diverse departments meant that the Quality Mark process significantly helped to raise the profile of the range of support needed by students with care experience. This resulted in securing new commitments and actions across the college.

*"You need representatives from a range of different departments for it to genuinely be a cross-college exercise. Our corporate parenting role applies to everyone - all 650 staff that work here - and we used the Quality Mark as a catalyst to get that message out through a major comms campaign. It's been like a lever to achieve a whole college approach."*

While the Quality Mark prompted the need for new work, it also helped Oldham College recognise what it was doing well.

*"The Quality Mark shone a spotlight on what we were doing 'above and beyond', that many people internally just took for granted as normal practice. Once you see it presented in your submission, it really shows what extra work is actually being done."*

### **Outcomes achieved from the Quality Mark process**

Reflecting on Oldham College's current status, staff spoke of growth in numbers of learners with care experience.

*"The volume of care experienced learners that we work with has more than doubled. It's not quite tripled yet but we're getting towards that level of increase – we are delighted that more people (and their Virtual Schools) are choosing us.*

*The comparative achievement rate differential between the general college population and those who are care experienced is about one percent. So, it's statistically insignificant and that's just the way it should be."*

Changes to the enrolment process, and questions about care experience being asked earlier, results in support being initiated sooner and transition to college being better managed for the students involved.

Another bonus of its involvement with NNECL and its regional network meetings, is that the college has improved contacts with other institutions.

*"The process has given us an expanded platform to work with other colleges and different universities. We would highly recommend going through the process with others at the same time."*

Oldham College now has much better developed internal practices while also having a stronger external profile through building better networking and partnership approaches.

*“Our NNECL Action Plan includes inducting and training new staff with regards to our approach and developing a Supporting for Excellence model. We've now got our own charity that we use to help with homelessness in particular situations. We're also involved in other regional and national initiatives and discussions regarding support for care experienced learners. Part of this exercise has been about getting ourselves out there and highlighting what FE can do!”*

Overall, the college sees this work as important and ongoing. It is being proactive in establishing the best foundation to support the students of the future.

*“It was in the news today that there are 86,000 young people in the care system. A large proportion of them are going to come through the FE system at some point. We need to be ready for them. So, there's an institutional aspect to this work, but there's also a lobbying aspect and it's about being ahead of the curve - we want to get things right to maximise the benefit for our learners.”*

### **Next steps with the Quality Mark**

The college recognises that there are other things that could be done and that they want to do – *“now we've set that bar, we need to keep going”* . Examples include further work on transitions, briefings for foster parents and career development support – *“making sure that we're doing this to the best level - the best standard that we can.”*

*“Transitions – if we can identify students early on, then the support can be put in place. So, as soon as they start in September we're up and running, we all know each other, the support's already in place for them and that transition has been as easy as it possibly could be for them.”*

*“There's another big piece of work to do in terms of careers. We believe that careers should be a mandatory part of the PEPs, because this area is a disadvantage for young people with care experience who don't necessarily have advocates or information sources others do.”*

### **The difference for students as a result of the Quality Mark**

Reflecting on the process, college staff believe that learners with care experience are now supported by a more thorough, responsive and professional approach. Learner feedback indicates this too.

*“They'll be getting things done on time, getting what they're entitled to and accessing the support that's available for them. The net has got smaller holes for people to fall through.”*

*“Potential learners come to this institution and they're going to be made to feel welcome. Whether they identify as care experienced or not, they'll see that signage*

*and that imagery up, and they'll know we have staff who are going to take them seriously and care about them. There might be ways we can offset some disadvantages they may have encountered or be going through, but that'll be dealt with discreetly and in the course of everyday events. The reality is more people are choosing to come here and our achievement rate is good - that says something."*

### **The future with the Quality Mark**

With ongoing societal changes, Oldham College wants to continue to be as relevant, resourced and responsive as it can be to support students. The Quality Mark has become an important part of helping it to do this and in turn Oldham College wants to be part of positive system change.

*"We're ready for a resubmission after the first three years. We're committed to continue the work we're doing - it's something we want to push forward with, improve on to make sure that students receive the highest FE standards we can produce."*

*"We have adopted care experience as a tenth protected characteristic in terms of our local policies. We would encourage other people, other organisations including local authorities to go for the NNECL Quality Mark."*

*As a technical and professional education college, a key objective for us is to help learners successfully progress into skilled jobs and/or higher education. Our transitions out and tracking to make sure we know that care experienced learners have every opportunity to thrive as much as everybody else is an on-going mission."*

*"In the education system there are lots of kite marks and things that you either have to go through because they are contractually mandatory and others that you choose to do - we're very discerning about the latter - but will be an early adopter for those that we think are of significant merit. The NNECL Quality Mark is clearly one of them - if it didn't already exist, we'd recommended somebody created it."*



## Case Study 2 – University of Exeter

*“Why wouldn't you want to get a kitemark which helps you improve support for care leavers? We are very supportive of it and we'd see that as part of our continued learning and support for these students.”*

### Background

In line with strategic goals to lead progress towards creating a fair, socially just and inclusive society, the University of Exeter is a committed member of the NNECL Quality Mark scheme.

In this case study, Nicola Sinclair, Head of Access, Participation and Outreach, and Natalie Bracher, Access and Support Officer reflect on how the University of Exeter has developed its support for students with care experience through its involvement in the Quality Mark.

### Achieving the Quality Mark

The University of Exeter was one of the first institutions to be awarded the Quality Mark. Support for care experienced students is an area that the university has been committed to for a long time; achieving the Quality Mark has helped to optimise their provision.

*“We had provision in place such as tuition fee waivers, a range of support for care leavers in terms of student success. We've been very supportive of our care leavers and we recognise the differences in the needs of students who are care experienced and offering that support.”*

### Impact on students

Taking part in the Quality Mark accreditation process helped the University to review and improve existing support for care experience students.

*“NNECL gave us a robust framework that enabled us to take a step by step look at our provision and tighten things up. Having that Quality Mark, we find it is a really useful way for us to improve what we do and make sure that we're measuring ourselves against good standards and that we have a framework in place around our provision.”*

*“If we hadn't been as far ahead, because we were an early institution for providing comprehensive support for care leavers, it would have been incredibly helpful to be taking the whole institution through that step-by-step process.”*

Widening participation efforts at the University of Exeter focus on different student groups, including care experienced students, students with caring responsibilities, students estranged from family, mature students and asylum seekers and refugees. It was observed that the Quality Mark process has been beneficial for other student groups who face similar challenges and barriers, not just those with care experience.

*“All of the advice, guidance and the framework is also really good for other students too. We have learned and applied the support, provision and the*

*thinking to other groups of students because if you can provide excellent support for those students, you're pretty much getting it right for everybody. I think there's that wider benefit of that kite mark which is quietly happening behind the scenes. We take an inclusive approach to our support and offer similar support to other students who might have different types of struggles and challenges. We also recognise there are crossovers between students that are care experienced and those that are estranged. They face very similar challenges and barriers."*

Discussions with colleagues about the Quality Mark have inspired new ideas. For example, the University has introduced small gestures to celebrate care experienced students' birthdays.

*"We give a birthday card and gift voucher to all of our care experienced students. These little touches mean a lot to our students."*

*"The birthday club, that came as a result of us going for the Quality Mark submission... because of our internal publicity about the Mark, our Senior Vice-President and Registrar said is there anything I can do? And someone said, well there's a simple thing you could do. It shows how it gives this group of students some visibility perhaps that they wouldn't have otherwise had."*

*"Something as simple as providing a birthday card to somebody, who otherwise won't be getting it and recognising that they're valued, is a really important thing."*

### **Consulting with students**

The Quality Mark assessment provided opportunities to gather feedback about the University and its support for care experienced learners.

*"Students were involved in part of the assessment as well - I think that's really key, that they feel that they're being heard."*

*"The process of almost formalising support for those students has also helped us in terms of involving them, even if it's a very informal, light touch way in terms of improving what we do."*

*"We've been very good at picking up the feedback from those students and then turning that into improvements."*

### **Ongoing commitment to Quality Mark**

The Quality Mark is held in high regard by colleagues at the University.

*"Due to the robustness of the assessment and the work that's involved I think it's definitely got credibility to it."*

*"Having that financial impact as well and paying for it shows that the university institution has got buy-in and that they recognise how important the Quality Mark is."*

*"There were people around the room saying it's a lot of hard work but it's really worth it, I didn't hear any dissenting voices, everyone felt that it had value."*

The University is committed to maintaining its Quality Mark, with colleagues from different departments currently working together to complete the reaccreditation process.

*“It's very straightforward. It's a joint effort with colleagues from our wellbeing team, and the student union are involved in planning what our actions are for the next three years. It is very much a joint venture and then it will go to governance as well so that we get the buy-in from wider colleagues. So, it does involve work, but I think it's good that it involves a lot of work so it's not just a tick box exercise.”*

The reaccreditation process was highlighted as a good opportunity to evaluate the University's work with care experienced students and help to consider future improvements.

*“The reaccreditation is also important because things move on... Universities are always changing and it could be quite easy to drop the ball. Having that reaccreditation and holding up a mirror and saying, are you still doing this? But also over the last three years we've organically changed and improved things. So, having a chance to contribute that as part of the reaccreditation is really important. I think it's a really good process to have.”*

*“If something's worth doing it's worth doing well, and there's something to having that kind of rigor and that matches having the Quality Mark itself. I really do think it's important as it's such a small group of students, so I think it does kind of elevate and shine a light on a vision which might otherwise be missed.”*

### **External awareness of NNCEL**

While there are high levels of awareness of the Quality Mark within the University and academic communities, there is scope for further promotion of the scheme to wider audiences.

*“I think there is recognition and people are aware of it, but I think there's still work to be done raising that awareness. I think especially for prospective students being aware. We have it on the website, but maybe when we do our talks in schools and saying, look out for the Quality Mark. But I think within higher education there is that awareness and with the government promoting and saying about the Quality Mark as well, I think that gives it a bit more 'umph', which is always good.”*

### **Achieving what they set out to do**

There were positive reflections about what the University has achieved through its participation in the Quality Mark scheme.

*“I think in terms of achieving a coherent offer that we think is good and has sound foundations and that support students, I think yes, absolutely.”*

However, it was also acknowledged that there is still more work to do, and there are challenges when measuring outcomes and evaluating success.

*“But when it comes to the outcomes for those individual students, there's always more that can be done. And I think because there's so few of them and the issues that they face are so complex, that even with good support in place you may not necessarily see the outcomes that you want for those students.”*

*“We're going through an evaluation process at the moment, and that evaluation has to be qualitative, it's very hard to know if you hadn't put that in place what would the outcomes look like. It's quite hard pin all of that down in a way, but we also know from informal feedback from students just how valuable all elements of that provision has been for them on a personal level.”*

Nicola and Natalie agreed that they would encourage other post-16 institutions to apply for the Quality Mark.

*“I think certainly for any organisation who haven't even thought about this type of support. But even for those who think like us, we thought, well actually we've got good things in place, but we still benefited a lot from it from the rigor of doing it. Why wouldn't you want to get a kite mark which helps you improve support for care leavers? We are very supportive of it and we'd see that as part of our continued learning and support for these students.”*

## Case Study 3 – University of Liverpool

*“Through the Quality Mark we have better post-entry support. We’re working more with faculties and support staff within other departments, and having more communication to look at what additional help can we offer to our students.”*

### Background

With aspirations to break into the top-100 universities worldwide, and with inclusion as one of its five values, the University of Liverpool’s commitment to social responsibility has been bolstered in recent years by its achievement of the NNECL Quality Mark.

In this case study, Ben Toleman from the University’s Widening Participation Team describes the support for students with care experience, developed over many years, and how more recently the Quality Mark has complemented and strengthened the package offered – notably in the area of post-entry support.

### The appeal of the Quality Mark process

Work with students with care experience at the University of Liverpool had been “a big priority of our work for many years”. A dedicated staff post working with looked after children and care leavers illustrated this, in comparison to some institutions where this responsibility can be added to a staff role. As a result, the University had well-developed pre-entry work supporting people with care experience to become students.

*“I oversee all the work we do with our care experienced young people. That involves working with young people prior to university entry - so any care experienced student who has started year seven, right the way through to Year 11 and then we do our post-16 work with the same cohort – that means supporting those in sixth forms and colleges and also any mature learners who identify as care experienced who are entitled to the support as well.”*

Although this pre-entry work was well-established, taking part in the Quality Mark had been appealing because it offered a chance to expand on the University’s internal evaluation process and gain an external view of the quality of their provision.

*“I’ve always felt that when we evaluate our own work it does feel a little bit like we’re marking our own homework. It can be difficult to be really objective. Having the opportunity of an assessor who was really experienced in this sector and this line of work and knew this cohort of young people really well was appealing.”*

### The experience of the Quality Mark assessment

As it approached the Quality Mark process, there was a reasonable level of confidence that the University’s package of pre-entry support for students would be positively assessed.

However, alongside this, there was keen interest to hear how practice relating to admissions, wellbeing and mental health support, and post-entry support in general, would be viewed by an external assessor and what development opportunities might be identified. This process has since led to positive change.

*“The Quality Mark did highlight a gap in our provision of supporting the students into the university in terms of how we continue to support them whilst they're with us. That's certainly changed off the back of the Quality Mark - I've got a lot more scope now to engage my students whilst they're with us, as opposed to just focusing on supporting them during their time beforehand in school or college.”*

A key role of the Quality Mark was that it gave evidence for the Widening Participation team to support the further development of their work.

*“Absolutely. That was a really big part of this work – we were saying ‘We need to do this. It's not just our thoughts. We've had a professional body come in. We've had our work assessed, this has been identified as a gap in our provision, and this is something we agree with. And we feel it ties in with other objectives in terms of those withdrawal rates for our students.’ It did provide really strong evidence to say this is something we absolutely need to do within the team.”*

### **A broad process reaching across the university**

The Quality Mark process involved a thorough review of practice because the support of students with care experience connects with so many different areas of university life.

*“Once we started to break down the specific areas of the Quality Mark, it became really clear that this wasn't just an outreach point of view – it was university-wide. We reached out to the Careers Team for the big Quality Mark section around careers advice and guidance for students' post-graduation. We brought those guys in and evaluated the support offered and made changes on the back of that. It was a similar process for wellbeing. We also tagged in our Senior Leadership Team both from a department level and a university-wide level. There was a lot of input from faculty as well – this was helpful in terms of what support our students are able to access for academic issues that arise. So it was very much a wider, broader view of what the university is doing across the institution.”*

*“There is a lot of admin relating to the Quality Mark. That isn't a negative, it's just the way it is. It needed time for networking with other departments – careers, accommodation, welfare etc. There were a lot of meetings that took place to discuss inputting into the Quality Mark. Having the time to dedicate to that was really important.”*

### **Improving support structures for students**

Through the Quality Mark process, the university identified that their approach of referring students to other departments for post-entry support could be improved; there was an opportunity for the pre-entry relationships established with support staff to continue post- entry, avoiding the need for new relationship building. The Quality Mark evidence was helpful in adding weight to the argument for changing support structures.

*“It gave us evidence and a bit of drive to say ‘let's change the approach for this’. It also tied into our withdrawal rates for care experienced students which were probably slightly higher than they should be at the time. We had data to say there's probably more we can do to help this specific cohort remain at the university.”*



*“Developing the post-entry support seemed like a natural progression – if we're bringing more and more care experienced students into university – it means we have a two-pronged approach of pre-entry and post-entry support as well. It's more holistic.”*

### **Developing a post-entry support team**

Identifying that a focus on post-entry support was needed has led to the formation of a new team.

*“The feedback during the Quality Mark pointed us in the direction of post-entry support, and made us consider what we could do to address that. Three years down the line, we've got a whole new team resource that we can use to engage with this cohort. It is branded as Liverpool Plus - a team of four people in the Outreach team with a remit to engage with students post-entry as opposed to that being the role of student support services or within the faculty. Now we've got permission, and everyone's aware of the support we offer, so there's no confusion about roles. There's a better joined-up approach in terms of how we access wellbeing support, mental health support, council support, working with the accommodation teams, all under one banner - the Quality Mark played a big part in that.”*

The experience for students is that they continue to be supported by a staff team who they were already familiar with, so some potential barriers to support being accessed are removed. Furthermore, those staff have access to additional data, such as on attendance, which can help to trigger further support.

*“Pre-Quality Mark, our pre-entry work supported people into university but the structure was then that students needed to go and start new relationships with other members and professionals across institutions - not just one but several points of contact. Now a small team supports you into university and continues to support you whilst you're with us, so in the team we'll all proactively reach out to our students and say, ‘How are things going? How's accommodation? How's finance?’ We have limited access to academic progress, not so much the results of assessments but we can see if any problems come up, we can look at attendance and engage with that, whereas previously we didn't have that remit.”*

*“Previously we found a lot of our care experienced students were sometimes left with no-one to turn to in terms of, ‘I've got an issue with my academic studies, I don't know who to go to’, ‘I've got an issue with my accommodation’, or ‘I've got a financial issue’. That was three different people for three different problems – whereas now a student can say, ‘I know [support team contact] from my time prior to entering into the university - I know I can contact them - and that communication continues throughout my time at the institution.’”*

*“If students look on our website, they can see that Quality Mark is something we take seriously.”*

Although it's too early to say if the Liverpool Plus programme has impacted on withdrawal rates but the early signs are positive about the support being accessed.



*“We're seeing our students are now coming back to us in terms of these issues that come up, and then we work with various different teams across the university to address the problem. So, that's been a really positive and progressive change.”*

### **Next steps in developing support**

Keeping an eye on statistics in the coming months will help the University to review the impact of the changes it has made, and further improvements are possible.

*“We're very interested to see what the withdrawal rates picture looks like next year - hopefully we will have had an impact on those. We've seen our number of care experienced students increase year on year. This year we placed 83 - the most we've ever placed in the last 10 years. In context, when we started this programme in 2014, there were seven, maybe eight care experienced students progressing to university. Working with NNECL has played a part in that growth.”*

*“There's a few other things within the Quality Mark we need to continue to work on, probably around financial support. We have got fairly generous bursaries in place but it's more when students aren't able to access bursaries or when they meet financial hardship, what happens next? Similar issues with things like guarantors – that's always a big agenda point across this line of work. So, there are always further developments possible - we want to add to this piece of work, and we'll be continuing to work on that as much we can.”*

The University intends to reapply for the Quality Mark soon. Since achieving it, they've continued to use the feedback received as a point of comparison for their work and look forward to a further assessment of what they have put in place.

*“We're eagerly waiting the next step, the re-application process. Every six or so months we've gone back and looked at the assessor's feedback, what's changed, how we've taken that feedback, how we've acted on that - we feel we've got a new submission ready to go to say, this is what they recommended, this is how we've acted on it and starting that process again of looking at the feedback of what's worked and what they'd like to see next.”*

The Quality Mark process has clearly helped the University of Liverpool develop a stronger and better tailored package of ongoing support for students with care experience while also broadening the awareness of this area of work across the institution's diverse departments.

*“We would definitely recommend any institution who works with care experienced students to go through this process. You don't often get the opportunity for somebody external to come in and really dive into what you're doing and have a look at practice – it's a really worthwhile activity.”*

## **ABOUT NNECL**

The National Network for the Education of Care Leavers, NNECL, is a charity working across the four nations of the UK dedicated to transforming the educational outcomes of young people with experience of being in care.

We work with education practitioners and care system professionals to transform the progression of young people from care, estranged and sanctuary seeking backgrounds into and through further and higher education, including higher apprenticeships so they can enjoy fulfilling careers which sustain them for life.

We are proud to have over 100 organisations in active membership, including universities and colleges, foster agencies, local authority leaving care teams, virtual schools and charities. Over 300 individual practitioners are supported via these organisations enabling us to reach a community of nearly 800 dynamic professionals who participate in our events and benefit from our regular policy and practice updates.

To find out more about work, our members, our Quality Mark or how you can contribute to transforming the educational opportunities of our young people please visit our website [NNECL.ORG](http://NNECL.ORG) Or get in touch by email - [info@nnecl.org](mailto:info@nnecl.org)

Our charity number is 1180793.

The Lines Between reported back to NNECL in December 2024. They can be contacted at [Lorraine@thelinesbetween.co.uk](mailto:Lorraine@thelinesbetween.co.uk)