

Positive Impact?



Annex 1: Literature Review

Annex to a report to the Unite Foundation by:

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Literature review

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Care experienced students in higher education

Introduction

Within The Children (Leaving Care) Act 2000, a Care Leaver is defined as someone who has been in the care of the Local Authority for a period of 13 weeks or more spanning their 16th birthday. This may include those who have spent time in Residential care, foster care, kinship care, or who have been 'Looked after at home'. Care Experienced refers to anyone who has been, or is currently in care. Students in higher education may therefore be categorised as a care leaver or a care experienced student.

Research around care experienced students in higher education is currently hampered by the overlapping issues of conflicting definitions and incomplete data (Harrison, 2019). For example, the annual figures produced by the Department for Education focus only on care leavers (Department for Education, 2018). These data are based on interviews with young people undertaken around their 19th (and, more recently, 20th and 21st) birthday and are broadly complete, but they do not include the wider group of care experienced students or care leavers who return to education later in life. They may also exclude students who have started in higher education but withdrawn early.

Conversely, the data held by the Higher Education Statistics Agency is compiled mainly on the basis of self-declaration of care status by students, who may choose not to declare for various reasons (Harrison, 2019). This does include the wider care experienced population, but the validity may be compromised by different operationalisations at the university level. Also, it excludes those studying higher education courses in further education colleges; this is estimated to be around 10% of the total higher education population in England, but as much as 40% in Scotland – and care experienced students are likely to be over-represented in this group.

In an attempt to resolve some of these issues, Harrison (2017) used linked longitudinal datasets that enabled a single cohort of English young people to be tracked from care to the age of 23. This had the advantage of being complete with respect to care leavers, but due to limited resources still excluded other care experienced students, care leavers accessing higher education after 23 and those in further education colleges.

The net result of these issues is that any analysis of care experienced students is necessarily partial and tentative. It is further complicated by a common conflation of care leavers with care experienced students and an assumption that care experienced students are primarily young – in fact, around half of full-time and nearly all part-time care experienced students are aged 21 or over (Harrison, 2019).

Profile of care experienced students

Harrison (2019) provided the first attempt at a statistical profile for English care experienced students based on HESA data for the 2016/17 academic year. Further analysis has been undertaken for this report. Both sets of analyses indicate that care experienced students are, in general, slightly more likely to be studying part-time than the general population and to be women. They were substantially more likely to be mature students, to live in their own home, to identify as disabled, to be a non-UK national and to enter with qualifications other than A-Levels. They were also less likely to attend an elite university, even once qualifications were taken into account. Finally, they were more likely to be studying social sciences and creative arts and less likely to be pursuing courses in science, engineering, languages or the humanities. A subgroup analysis of care leavers suggested that they generally had a similar profile to the wider care experienced group, but that were even more likely to be older, a non-UK national and have lower status entry qualifications.

From the opposite perspective, Harrison (2017) examined which care leavers were disproportionately likely to participate in higher education. Using a logistic regression model, he found that the strongest determinant was, unsurprisingly, attainment at 16. However, once this was controlled for, care leavers who were women

and those from a minority ethnic community were significantly more likely to access higher education, while those with special educational needs and those from neighbourhoods with less of a tradition of making use of higher education, were less likely to do so, all else being equal.

Participation rates

The question concerning the proportion of care leavers or care experienced people participating in higher education is again vexed by definitional differences, data availability and the timescales considered. The DFE (2019) dataset reports that 5 percent of care leavers are in higher education on their 19th birthday, rising to 7 percent of 19 to 21 year olds. However, this is almost certainly an under-estimate (for reasons discussed in Harrison, 2019) and Harrison (2017) reports that 12 percent of care leavers have participated in higher education by the age of 23, while acknowledging again that this too is likely to be an under-estimate. Based on the overall age profile of care leavers in higher education (Harrison, 2019), an estimated lifetime participation rate of around 20 to 25 percent is appropriate. The participation rates for other care experienced people are likely to be somewhat higher, but no analysis has yet been undertaken.

Harrison (2017) also explores how participation rates for care leavers compare to the general population of young people when background factors are taken into account, concluding that they are 11 percent less likely to attend higher education; this is a statistically significant difference. Furthermore, Harrison demonstrates that the majority of the difference can be explained by care leavers' lower attainment at 16 and higher incidence of special educational needs, most likely in the form of mental health issues deriving from adverse childhood experiences.

Other contributory factors may include a lack of confidence about their ability to succeed (Centre for Social Justice, 2019; Driscoll, 2013; Lewis et al., 2015), ongoing disruption through school or placement changes (Centre for Social Justice, 2019) and/or poor support or even discouragement from local authorities and schools (Centre for Social Justice, 2019; Harrison, 2017; Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005). Driscoll (2013) in particular, focuses on the need for strong and trusted adult relationships to support resilience on the pathway into higher education for young care leavers; this is reinforced by Jackson and Ajayi's (2007) findings which highlight the importance of emotional support in HE. They found that students who had maintained relationships with foster carers regarded emotional support as more important than financial support. Finally, Mallon (2007) and Harrison (2017) reinforce the importance of later participation in higher education as an important pathway for care experienced people.

Access to higher education

Academic interest in access to higher education for care leavers and other care experienced people broadly dates back to the 'By Degrees' project (Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005). By tracking 129 individuals through multiple interviews, they explored the issues that challenged care leavers' ability to participate fully in higher education; their findings continue to frame our understanding and they tend to have been replicated in subsequent studies:

- **Accommodation:** While there is significant diversity, care experienced students – and particularly care leavers – are more likely to have housing needs that differ from their peers. For younger students, the key issue is access to accommodation during university holiday periods when they lack a 'family' home to which they can return (Centre for Social Justice, 2019; Harrison, 2017; Starks, 2013). This has been the focus of government concern for some time (DfES, 2007) and the recent 'Staying Put' initiative that allows care leavers to remain with foster carers while they are in education appears to be having a positive impact (Munro et al., 2012) alongside year-round university provision. Other care experienced students may be living independently prior to higher education, and the challenge for these is to maintain the continuity of their primary home when going away to university or accept that their choice of university is constrained (Centre for Social Justice, 2019; Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005). Those with their own families may be particularly prone to this challenge, while some struggle to find suitable new accommodation near their place of study – especially where their university is not in a position to assist with finding family-friendly housing. In addition, a small proportion of care experienced students enter university without housing, perhaps after a period of homelessness or incarceration, and have difficulties associated with the administrative elements of securing accommodation – e.g. deposits and references. Finally, some care

experienced students may find that university accommodation places them in a position of danger due to temptations around substance misuse (Harrison, 2017).

- **Financial support:** Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley (2005) found that care leavers were often in financial difficulties, but the overall position on financial support for care experienced students has improved markedly in the last fifteen years. Through their 'access and participation plans', most English universities now provide substantial targeted support through bursaries, tuition fee waivers and other in-kind contributions (e.g. discounted housing or travel cards); this is less common in Scotland where tuition fees are not levied. In addition, care leavers are also entitled to a bursary of £2,000 through their local authority, with some providing more. However, despite these improvements, care experienced students continue to highlight diverse difficulties around finance. Most frequently, this is around navigating the system of securing support and, in particular, completing the necessary paperwork to establish their status – this is reliant, for example, on the efficient actions of local authorities in confirming details around care (Harrison, 2017). Others report struggling to manage their budgets effectively as they are living independently for the first time with no prior experience of financial management and/or no financial safety net (Centre for Social Justice, 2019; Harrison, 2017; Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005). In addition, financial difficulties appear to be disproportionately prevalent among care experienced students with dependent children, those with other caring responsibilities and those who are disabled. This may represent insufficient overall support, the existence of hidden costs or difficulties arising from a shift from benefit dependency (Harrison, 2017; Starks, 2013).
- **Mental health and disability:** While robust and recent data are lacking, it is well-understood that many care experienced people have mental health issues – the figure may be as high as 70 percent (Department for Education and Skills, 2007). This legacy of childhood trauma presents a particular challenge with respect to higher education as students may struggle to manage the stress and anxiety inherent in university study, compromising their ability to thrive in their new context (Harrison, 2017; Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005; Starks, 2013). Particular challenges may come through the transfer or loss of support (particularly at the interface between adolescent and adult services) and a lack of specialist provision within higher education, where there has been a marked shift away from long-term therapeutic support towards more general and short-term 'wellbeing' (Harrison, 2017). More generally, care experienced students are more likely than average to be disabled and this may cause particular difficulties around finances, accommodation and access to the curriculum (Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005).
- **Academic issues:** A common experience for care experienced students is that they had a disrupted education, potentially missing significant amounts of school or having to move schools frequently. Even among those achieving highly, they often report having gaps in their foundational knowledge or a low confidence about their abilities (Harrison, 2017; Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005; Starks, 2013). In addition, care experienced students are more likely to enter higher education with non-traditional qualifications and they may experience challenges in terms of adapting to more 'academic' forms of teaching and learning (Harrison, 2019). Finally, academic difficulties can be further exacerbated by mental and physical health issues and caring responsibilities that make meeting the temporal expectations of higher education (with assessment deadlines and examinations) more difficult than for other students (Harrison, 2017; Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005; Starks, 2013).
- **Community integration:** Linked in part to the previous elements, many care experienced students talk about difficulties with integrating into the university community (Ellis and Johnston, 2019; Harrison, 2017; Starks, 2013; Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005). This is multi-dimensional, but includes a fear of stigmatisation, a reluctance to answer questions about childhood and family, a lack of knowledge about care (particularly among academic staff) and practical difficulties with maintaining social relationships – e.g. living with foster carers and/or having to commute to university and missing out on social time. Given the well-established link between integration and thriving in higher education, these feelings of isolation are potentially difficult.
- **Immigration status:** Finally, as noted above, care experienced students are more likely than average to not be UK nationals. While this only applies to a minority, the students' history of migration – either with their family or unaccompanied – can lead to difficulties in resolving their immigration status, especially where relevant paperwork may be lost or important deadlines missed (Harrison, 2017; Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005). This can be understandably stressful for the student and also requires extensive co-operation from their local authority.

This list is not intended to be exhaustive, nor to suggest that all care experienced students are subject to all the difficulties outlined. In particular, each individual will have a unique blend of challenges that result in part from their diverse past and present circumstances, while some will not feel that they have any significant issues with respect to participating in higher education. It should also be noted that nearly all of the issues outlined above may present themselves to students who are not care experienced and that universities should be familiar with supporting, for example, students with mental health issues, alternative qualifications, their own families or complex immigration situations.

One element in successful access to higher education for care experienced students is the importance of managing the inherent changes and transitions (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2015; Harrison, 2017; Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley, 2005). Poor transitions can be marked by upheaval, feelings of abandonment, confusion about expectations, discontinuity in support, inadequate/delayed finance or inappropriate accommodation, as well as novel practical issues that require navigation. In some instances, these difficulties were resolved or faded with time, but Harrison (2017) found that students reporting poor transitions were significantly more likely to consider leaving later in their course; this suggests that initial adversity can have a long-lasting impact. Cotton, Nash and Kneale (2014) reflect on the importance of 'safety nets' for care experienced students, especially in the absence of family networks, while their later study (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2017) stresses the need for strong adult relationships (e.g. with friends and teaching staff) and the ability to participate fully in the university community. Hauari, Hollingworth and Cameron's (2019) qualitative research with care experienced students, for example, found that areas of concern related to making an informed choice, gaining continuity of support, flexibility of responses so individual needs can be supported, and developing and enabling a sense of belonging.

A further element integral to enabling successful transitions into HE, is the nature of the on-going support from the student's local authority where they are a care leaver. Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley (2005) found this to be highly variable and a source of frustration for students, where key individuals could not be contacted or provisions altered. The Who Cares? Trust (2012), Starks (2013), Harrison (2017) and Ellis and Johnston (2019) found a similar pattern of variability, with some students reporting very strong support, but others feeling let down by their local authority – this is despite positive social policy developments such as the extension of access to a personal adviser. In addition, care experienced students who did not meet the tight definition as a care leaver often noted that they had no local authority support on which to draw.

University support for care experienced students

The concept that care experienced students might need additional or specialised forms of support in order to thrive in higher education, has been established for around 15 years. Significant early work was undertaken by the Frank Buttle Trust (now known as Buttle UK), with the development of a 'quality mark' for universities signing up to a list of minimum provisions (Starks, 2013). Launched in 2006 and following-on from Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley (2005), the quality mark focused primarily on universities taking a systematic approach to ensure that existing support services were accessible and relevant to care experienced students. However, there was also a requirement to develop some new forms of support, inter alia, the provision of year-round accommodation, early contact with new students to discuss support needs and training for staff to enable them to better understand and respond to care experienced students (Starks, 2013). The principle of close liaison between universities and local authorities to ensure continuity of support was also established at this point. Eventually awarded to over 100 universities, the quality mark was wound-up in 2015 as it was felt that the sector had made sufficient progress and that it had therefore served its purpose.

Commissioned by Buttle UK to review progress over the previous ten years, Rawson (2016) concluded that universities had made significant progress, especially with respect to building new collaborative multi-agency partnerships and the growth of bespoke forms of support including outreach, bursaries and careers advice. In particular, the role of a designated member of staff with responsibility for care experienced students was seen as key in providing day-to-day services (also see Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2015 and Starks, 2013), collecting student feedback and driving improvements; they also often represented a trust figure for a group who have often been let down in the past. However, Starks (2013) found that students were still reporting highly-variable levels of support from universities, although the support was generally well-regarded by students – and sometimes considered vital in their ability to participate and succeed. Recent research by Hauari, Hollingworth and Cameron (2019) found that definitions of care leaver/care experienced students, as employed by HEIs, remain variable. This in turn means that institutional policy and practices are also highly variable which can lead to some students not having their needs met.

This growth in university-led support provided the spur for the creation of the Propel website by the Who Cares? Trust (now Become). This draws together information on what is available at each university into a searchable database for young people, carers and professionals. The website is generally well-regarded and has a role in normalising participation in higher education and showcasing inspirational student stories, alongside its primary purpose (Alexander and Callaghan, 2017).

We are now entering a period of renewed political interest in the support provided to care leavers and, to some extent, other care experienced people in higher education. The requirement for local authorities to publish their 'local offer' to care leavers makes explicit what financial, accommodation and other support can be expected, while the 'care leaver covenant' seeks organisational signatories (including universities) who are willing to offer enhanced services; the Department for Education has recently published a list of 'principles' that universities are asked to adopt (Department for Education, 2019), while the Office for Fair Access (now the Office for Students) publishes regular advice to universities on improving their provision (Office for Fair Access, 2017). A new 'kitemark' was launched by the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers in May 2019, with the aim of building on the earlier work and towards enshrining the 'gold standard'; this will initially be piloted by eight institutions before a nationwide roll-out (Centre for Social Justice, 2019).

Evaluating interventions

As noted by Rawson (2016), the evaluation of interventions intended to support care experienced students is challenging as numbers are often small and there is rarely a ready comparison group. Indeed, while there is a 'grey' literature of case studies about interventions in schools, colleges and universities (e.g. Centre for Social Justice, 2019; Rawson, 2016), studies that robustly address the question of effectiveness are rare. Lewis et al. (2015) identify skills development and confidence building as a key means of overcoming concerns about higher education among suitably qualified young people, with participants in an outreach programme reporting a higher likelihood of progressing. Gazeley and Hinton-Smith (2018) reviewed the effectiveness of a programme for new care experienced undergraduates based around a coaching intervention, finding that positive relationships with other students helped to build resilience and knowledge that supported student success.

Student success

Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley (2005) found that their sample of care leavers in higher education had a slightly lower-than-average withdrawal rate, but this most likely reflects a selection bias in terms of which students volunteered to participate. Harrison (2017) explored national outcomes for English care leavers in higher education and found that their headline withdrawal rates were nearly twice those of their peers, with 19 percent leaving higher education and not returning by the age of 23. When entry qualifications and other background variables were taken into account the gap narrowed, but care leavers were still 38 percent more likely to withdraw than other students, all else being equal. This suggests that the challenges outlined in the previous section have a strong impact on care leavers' and other care experienced students' ability to succeed. Jackson, Ajayi and Quigley (2005) found that students in their sample were much more likely to leave higher education if they had three or more concurrent difficulties. Conversely, Starks (2013), Rawson (2016) and Harrison (2017) draw attention to the role of a designated member of university staff in supporting student success through troubleshooting, providing emotional support and helping students to navigate complex administrative systems.

However, when exploring classifications for care leavers completing their degree, Harrison (2017) found that care leavers were no less likely to achieve a first or upper second class degree than other students once background factors had been taken into account. This slightly contradictory finding may reflect the disproportionate loss of less successful students through early withdrawal, but it highlights the underpinning ability of care leavers to achieve, with many transcending lower entry qualifications to graduate with very strong degree results. Recent research by Pinkney and Walker (2020, p. 8) has evidenced how relational support, together with the provision of financial support, and combined with the student's own agency, resilience, internal drive and determination, [can] provide a powerful set of factors that can underpin success within higher education for care experienced students.

Estranged students in UK higher education

Introduction

Estranged students are those who are studying in further or higher education without familial, primarily parental, support and who may, or may not, have been recognised as independent adults for student funding purposes. The Office for Students, for example, considers that 'In higher education, the term 'estranged' applies to students who are aged 18 to 24 and are not communicating with either of their living biological parents' (OfS, 2019); whilst the Student Loans Company (SLC) notes that 'to be considered irreconcilably estranged from your parents, you won't have had any written or verbal contact with either parent and this is unlikely to change. Usually, for a period of at least twelve months, but we will consider all cases' (Student Finance England, no date). This means that most estranged students entering higher education at 18 will have become estranged from their parents prior to becoming an adult themselves.

The Oxford University Students Union (Macdonald, 2018) goes further, however, defining estranged students as:

'Young people studying without the support and/or approval of a family network. They lack a sustained or prolonged communicative relationship (either emotionally, financially and/or physically) with either of their living biological parents and often their wider family networks as well.'

As Macdonald notes, unlike care experienced students or care leavers, estranged students have removed themselves from their families without the intervention of the local authority system (Bland and Shaw, 2015) and thus there is no statutory obligation to recognise them, or to assess and support their needs. Indeed Bland (2015) found that 59% of the estranged students in her study had not come into any contact with social services about their family breakdown. In addition although around 1 in 5 estranged students have been in care they do not fit the statutory definition of a care leaver (Bland, 2015). Instead estranged students 'are considered independent in the view of SLC [Student Loans Company] on a case-by-case basis, and the background of each student is carefully examined with references sought from independent trusted individuals' (Bland and Shaw, 2015, p. 5). Across all these definitions of estrangement, however, estranged status refers only to those students who are aged 18-24.

Profile of estranged students

Little is known about either the demographics or the experiences of estranged students and, as a result, estranged students have, until recently, been overlooked in relation to other more long standing widening participation policies or funding categories (Taylor and Costa, 2019). The recognition of students as being estranged (as opposed to independent adults who are those students aged 25 or older) is a relatively new one with much of the pressure to recognise estranged students as a discrete group is as a result of lobbying by the Stand Alone Charity (www.standalone.org.uk) and the Unite Foundation (www.unitefoundation.co.uk).

However, whilst estranged students have now been recognised as a specific group, the categorisation of estrangement for funding or policy purposes remains a restrictive one - although there are three groups of 'estranged' students.

1. *Those recognised by the SLC as an estranged student:* this group includes those who have been able to evidence their estrangement to the Student Loans Company prior to arriving in higher education. Students in this group may or may not wish to disclose their status to their HEI.
2. *Those waiting to be recognised by the SLC as an estranged student:* this group includes those who arrive in HE still needing support to prove their estrangement and who will therefore need to disclose information about their estrangement as well as those who become estranged during their studies.

3. *Those not recognised by the SLC as an estranged student:* this group may include
 - a. those who have been unsuccessful in evidencing their estrangement, but are not receiving parental support (or this support is variable and inconsistent) and are therefore recognised by their HEI as in effect estranged
 - b. those who do not wish to disclose their status either to the SLC or to their HEI.

In their survey of 584 students who were classified as 'estranged from parents' by the SLC, Stand Alone (Bland, 2015) found that 61% of respondents were aged between 18 and 21 years; the majority (94%) were from England; and just under three quarters were female. Whilst this may be reflective of self-selection in choosing to participate in the survey and not representative of actual demographics of this group, research by Blake (2015) found that of the 807 individuals who responded to her survey into estrangement in adulthood, 89% were female, suggesting that women are more likely to be, or report being, estranged than men.

Factors that contribute to family estrangement are wide-ranging and diverse but may include (amongst others): abuse; a family member choosing one relationship over another; feelings of lack of love or support; and/or having different values to other family members (Blake, 2017), with one of the main characteristics of estranged students being an unstable family background with 'abuse, and particularly emotional abuse, [are] the key causes of family alienation, alongside clashes of values and mismatched expectations about family roles' (Bland and Shaw, 2015, p. 5). It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that family estrangement may be more common amongst Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT+) communities (Blake, 2017; ECU, 2009). It is also important to note that although international students do not appear in the SLC data there is a level of estrangement amongst international students which warrants recognition - either because they may also declare as LGBTQ, cultural differences, or because of a clash of values (Stevenson and Bland, 2017).

Participation rates

Data on estranged students is less readily known than that for care leavers. For example, UCAS records and collates information on care leavers at the point of application but not estranged students. The data available, therefore, is that collated by the SLC on the numbers of students who receive support following recognition as being estranged from their families.

A Freedom of Information request to the Student Loans Company by the BBC¹, reported in December 2019, found 7,566 students in England, 341 in Wales and 121 in Northern Ireland are classed as estranged this academic year. The Student Awards Agency for Scotland said it had 145 such students.

However, Bland and Shaw (2015) consider, amongst others, that it is likely that the actual number of estranged students could be higher: those who have been estranged from their family for less than 12 months and/or could not find the relevant trusted independent person to verify their estrangement at the time of applying to the Student Loans Company (SLC), will not be included in the data. In their survey of over 2,700 Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender students, the former Equality Challenge Unit (2009) found that the parents of 4.9% of their lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) student respondents, and 7.1% of their trans student respondents had refused to provide financial support for them; whilst 3% (63) of LGB students and 9.2% (13) of trans students were in effect estranged from their parents but did not know how to prove this legally, and so were receiving no financial support. Other students report that they would wish to be formally estranged but fear the repercussions of formally doing so (Macdonald, 2018) or may become estranged once on course so may not appear in the SLC data (ibid).

¹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-50747583>

Access to higher education

As Simon (2008) found in her research, 'young people in difficulty' (which excludes care leavers but includes estranged students) are over-represented in their access to and use of temporary or transitional accommodation and are more likely to be living in rooms in housing projects than care leavers; whilst Bland (2015) found that 33% of estranged students have been affected by homelessness issues before they started studying. Moreover, concerns around the likelihood of accessing affordable accommodation may influence aspirations towards accessing higher education (Cotton, Nash, & Kneale, 2014).

Early work by Callender (Callender and Jackson, 2003; Callender and Jackson, 2005) found that those from the lowest socio-economic backgrounds were more likely than other students to be deterred from planning to enter higher education because of their fear of debt. However more recent research, following the tuition fee increase of 2011-12, has evidenced that differences in debt aversion are absent between different socio-economic groups (Callender and Mason, 2017).

In addition, however, many students find it difficult to gain estranged status even when making a formal application. The National Union of Students (NUS, 2008) found, for example, that those seeking to prove estrangement were required by their local authority (this application is now made to the SLC) to provide evidence solely from 'formal' sources such as the police or social services, even when such bodies had no previous involvement with respective students or their families, or from the parents the students are seeking to estrange themselves from. In addition, many local authorities were strictly enforcing the 12 month 'no contact' requirement and using any form of limited contact in that time as cause for invalidating the claim for estrangement. This is echoed in research with Scottish students which found that proving family estrangement was challenging for young people (Taylor, 2019) and in Bland and Blake's (forthcoming) research which found that the stigma around family estrangement prevented some students from disclosing their family status. This results in significant delays in receiving statutory finance. For other students, proving estrangement is highly stressful with students describing the system as 'lacking in compassion' and may result in some students not persisting in making their applications for funding or withdrawing early from their studies (Bland, 2015). More recently, the SLC has been accused of spying on the social media accounts of estranged students as part of an anti-fraud drive. As reported in the Guardian (Weale, 2018), of the random selection of 150 estranged students scrutinised by the SLC, 81 had their funding withdrawn and, although the figure has fallen since cases have been resolved, it left many students in hardship with a number dropping out of their studies.

University support for care experienced students

The concept that estranged students might need institutional support is less well established than that for care experienced students. However, as evidenced above, prior to arriving in higher education those estranged from their families may have experienced significant financial, social or emotional difficulties directly arising from their estrangement (Taylor and Costa, 2019; Bland and Blake, forthcoming). These experiences may continue once in higher education. However, as the Office for Students (2019) notes, estranged students often have similar needs to care leavers, and may have been in care, but they do not fit the statutory definition of a care leaver and so (largely) do not have access to the same forms of financial or housing support as care leavers do.

As a result, estranged students are often forced to stretch their statutory finance to support themselves out of term time (Bland, 2018). In addition, whilst many HEIs now offer 52 week accommodation, halls of residence can be expensive if the full year has to be paid for. In contrast, estranged students may not have access to financial support to enable them to pay deposits or pay rent in advance to private landlords. Poverty may therefore result in estranged students making housing choices apart from their peers and the institutional community or living in precarious accommodation (Bland, 2018).

Many HEIs now recognise the pressures faced by estranged students with the charity Stand Alone having been influential in gaining institutional recognition of the needs of estranged students. To date, 66 HEIs or Further Education Colleges (FECs) delivering HE have taken the Stand Alone pledge which asks institutions over a two-year period to work towards 'creating the right environment and conditions for estranged students to stay resilient and thrive'. The four areas of concern relate to finance, accommodation, mental health and wellbeing, and outreach and transition (www.thestandalonepledge.org.uk/about). Many institutions now offer bursaries and other targeted support for estranged students and/or have dedicated support workers who can help to support them in their studies.

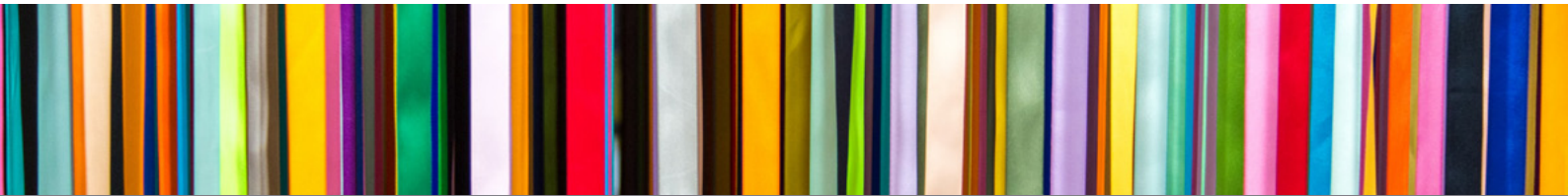
In addition, the Unite Foundation Scholarship scheme (www.unitefoundation.co.uk/get-a-scholarship/) helps estranged students access HE by providing free accommodation for up to three years of their course. Buttle UK also offers financial support to estranged students under 21. Grants can be provided for equipment for studies, accommodation, and wellbeing support amongst other areas (www.buttleuk.org/need-support/young-people). In addition the Helena Kennedy Foundation offers support to young people who are experiencing significant difficulty to make the transition from school or Further Education into Higher Education (www.hkf.org.uk/hkf-awards/bursary-scheme-1).

Despite these interventions, however, difficulties in evidencing estrangement, on-going poverty and concerns over housing, a lack of emotional support, and fears of the future including post-graduate (un)employment are key factors which impact on estranged students and which can inhibit academic focus, and impact on persistence (Bland, 2018; Stevenson and Bland, 2017). However, to date there is no comprehensive data relating to the retention, academic outcomes, or progression into work or further study of estranged students and further research is needed.

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