

Unite

Foundation

This is


our story

Introduction


Back in 2012, if a student was estranged or care experienced, would many people have understood what that meant, and the impact it could have on their journey to and through university? Do enough people understand now?

Going to university without family support is challenging and studying without 'parent privilege'—as Unite Foundation graduate Paige puts it— means putting your trust in the higher education system to support you and enable you to succeed at university and beyond.

The Unite Foundation, which marked its 10th year in 2022, is a charity that provides a #HomeAtUniversity for estranged and care experienced students, through a nationwide scholarship scheme. The scholarship takes care of students' accommodation and bills, all year round for up to 3 years of study; so far, over 600 estranged and care experienced young people have gone to university on the Unite Foundation Scholarship.



Studying without ‘parent privilege’ means putting your trust in the higher education system to support you and enable you to succeed at university and beyond.



Students on the Unite Foundation scholarship have always told us how life changing the scholarship has been for them and now we have the stats to back that up. As part of our 10th birthday, we commissioned JISC to carry out an independent comparative analysis of a decade worth of data and we now have strong evidence that our scholarship positively impacts student progression, completion rates and degree outcomes.

Providing a #HomeAtUniversity for care experienced and estranged students works. You can read the full report [here](#).

We also published a 10 year anniversary book – a celebration of every student that has been to university on the Unite Foundation scholarship. Dannii Jones, a scholarship student who, in 2022, graduated from UWE with a 1st Class degree in Photography was commissioned to apply her distinctive photographic style to the theme of ‘Home’; the thread that runs throughout all of our work.

Dannii travelled the country photographing and interviewing our scholarship students. These portraits feature in the book and form part of a travelling exhibition that has toured universities across the UK over our anniversary year. These portraits also formed part of her final year project.

This is a condensed summary of our anniversary book. If you'd like to order a hard copy and read the book in full, [drop us an email and we can pop one in the post.](#)

Our 10th year

Our 10th year was jam packed, supporting the inception and growth of [a community for all care experienced and estranged students across the UK](#), the publication of a [joint report with UCAS](#), increasing the number of scholarships we deliver via the [Home at University](#) pilot scheme, and the launch of the [#BeOurGuarantor Campaign](#).

We're kicking off the next decade as we mean to go on! Here's to the next 10 years.

This is

If you are an estranged student, you are studying without the support of your parents due to a breakdown in your relationship—this might be your biological, step or adoptive parents, and sometimes wider family members too. Some young people remove themselves from a dysfunctional situation while others may have been disowned for holding different values or pursuing education against the wishes of their family or extended family network.

Estranged

This is

If you are a care experienced student, this means you have spent time in care before you were 18 in one of many different potential settings, for example a residential children's home, foster homes, a home with friends or other family members in kinship care, for example under a Special Guardianship order.

Care Experienced



The story so far

Jenny Shaw
Trustee
Unite Foundation

The Unite Foundation was founded by Unite Students during its 21st birthday year and was intended to provide a 'Home for Success' at university for young people who might otherwise face insurmountable challenge in going to, and progressing through, university.

I was pleased to manage the Unite Foundation in its start-up days, working with our founding university partners – University of Bristol, University of Edinburgh, Sheffield Hallam University and King's College London – all of which celebrated 10 years with us in 2022. Our central offer was, and still is, to provide free accommodation over multiple years of study. We wanted to meet a key basic need – that of safe and stable housing – so that students could feel secure right through their university years.

Ten years ago, care experienced young people were emerging as a group of interest in widening access, thanks to pioneering universities and the work of Buttle UK. They were one of the most under-served communities in terms of access to university, and often had experience of housing insecurity. The charitable focus of our scholarships quickly moved to prioritising care leavers, a focus which has continued ever since.

At the time there was no equivalent evidence base for the needs of estranged students, nonetheless, Unite Foundation welcomed guidance from Liverpool John Moores University and the charity Stand Alone, who encouraged us to extend this support to young people estranged from their families. Estranged students faced a lot of the same challenges as care experienced students but usually with much less support available to them. Liverpool John Moores University joined our network and the Unite Foundation became the first scholarship scheme in the UK that explicitly focused on estranged students. This was followed in 2015 with the publication of New Starts, partnership research with Stand Alone, which became the basis for the first sector briefing paper on estranged students from HEFCE (now Office for Students).

By 2016 we were growing as a charity, increasing our university partners to 10 and employing full time staff. I was proud to become a Board member to help inform how professional collaboration across universities, accommodation providers and charity professionals could deliver a holistic package of student support.



We wanted to meet
a key basic need—that of
safe and stable housing.





Just a year later we took a significant step forward, almost tripling our network to 27 universities across England and Scotland. The model evolved too, awarding scholarships directly to students who could then take this to their university of choice within the Unite Foundation's network.

As a charity we hope that we've evolved to do one thing very well: provide a year-round home at university for estranged and care experienced students through a unique scholarship scheme. It's a scheme that ensures young people from all parts of the country and of all academic abilities and disciplines can pursue higher education safe in the knowledge that they have secure housing.

We've broadened efforts to develop our data strategy, improved the onboarding process for scholarship students, developed employment partnerships and started to build a wider awareness of the Unite Foundation, carving out space in the world of social media so that all young people that could benefit from the scheme are aware of it.

Our research work has continued with the launch, at the Houses of Parliament of "Positive Impact?", research into the factors affecting access, retention and graduate outcomes for university students with a background of care or family estrangement.

2020 marked a refreshed mission and vision by placing Unite Foundation students in the driving seat of the charity's communications – creating This is Us. Scholarship students now own their narrative and can take the lead on changes to improve the university experience for all estranged and care experienced students under a shared community identity.

No review of recent years could ignore the Covid-19 pandemic which challenged us all. The study, livelihoods and futures of many students were immediately uncertain, and the legacy of this time is arguably still to unfold. Something we already understood as a charity – but that came as a realisation to many – was how vital the concept of 'home' is, and how that can connect so directly to a sense of isolation and concerns about safety. During this time, through the provision of housing, the Unite Foundation network partners were able to make sure our students were safe, shielding them if needed, and for those who were student nurses helping them continue their NHS shifts without risking others. We are thankful to each university colleague, Unite Students employees and Unite Foundation staff members that made it possible.

Over the past year, the Unite Foundation has significantly expanded its Board of Trustees, grown the team and has set out a clear and strong set of future ambitions. [See our website for more detail.](#)

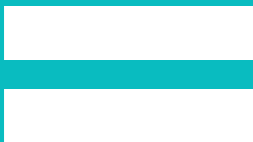
All of us at the Unite Foundation are hugely grateful to those who have played their part in the charity's journey so far and we're looking forward to seeing what can be achieved together over the coming decade.

This is

our goal



Our goal is that free accommodation for estranged and care experienced students is provided as standard support across all UK universities.



A #HomeAtUniversity

Our goal is for all estranged and care experienced students to have the choice to go to university safe in the knowledge that they will have a secure home.

Our students say that having a safe and secure home at university means they can make the most of the full university experience. Our data also tells us that the provision of a home at university – the security it provides and the financial stress it alleviates – has a strong impact on continuation rates for this group of students.

We're developing links with other funders and university partners to provide more scholarships. We'll also be building an evidence base using consistent data to make the case for the provision of a home at university for all estranged and care experienced students.

10
years

2012 –
2022

29 partners in 15 cities

514 scholarships, 184 graduates pursuing
their dreams

4 Series of the This is Us podcast

£13 million donated by Unite Students

1
year
on...

2023

31 partners in 19 cities

Unite Foundation has awarded 721 scholarships, with 297 graduates now pursuing their dreams

5 Series of the This is Us podcast

£15 million donated by Unite Students

£118K donated by other funders

This

is us

We're the students on the Unite Foundation scholarship. We believe being an estranged young person or care leaver shouldn't mean being left behind and, through the scholarship, we're being united with our futures through going to uni. This offers us a sense of equality and breeds bigger dreams; just as we deserve.

The scholarship means we have a hassle-free home at uni so we can focus on the whole university experience and have space to plan our careers. Our accommodation and bills are covered for up to 3 years. That includes all through the holidays too, so we don't have to wonder where to go during reading weeks or over the winter or summer breaks. We can even stay on for months after we graduate to plan our next move. That means a lot.

Without the Unite Foundation a lot of us wouldn't have had the same experience at university that we've been able to, some of us wouldn't be here at all.



Come and meet just a small number of the **600** young people who have been to university on the Unite Foundation scholarship. Of course we're all different with unique talents, perspectives and ambitions but, with our images and words, we're all expressing the profound impact being a university student has had on our lives.

Through sharing something personal we hope you not only understand why the scholarship was so important to each of us personally, but why a home at university is important for all estranged and care experienced students like us.



[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Being granted the Unite Foundation scholarship has been positively life changing for me. You see no one can ever take away your knowledge, making your education priceless. The person I was before and the person I am now are very distinctive.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]



[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

“Stop resisting. You have everything here. Why do you need to go to school? They’ll brainwash you.”

So, what did I say, you ask?

I just graduated.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]



My university experience was life-changing. When I think back to who I was around five to six years ago, I'm astonished at how much has changed and for the better.





I have learned so much about myself
and the endless opportunities that
await me in this world.





[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

One important lesson I have learned is that only time goes in one direction, we humans are allowed to sway away from norms and confines.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]



[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

In 4th year I managed to achieve a 1st class BA Hons in journalism. I now have my dream job working for the BBC in Scotland. I recently made my first film, 'Should I tell you I'm trans?'.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]



[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

University gave me time to breathe
and allowed me the space to grow,
learn, and figure out who I am.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]



[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Believing in yourself is easier when those around you believe in you too. Becoming a Unite Foundation scholarship student and being at the university I was in, gave me that new perspective.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]



[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

I have been able to properly grow and mature as a student and person. This has only really been possible because I had enough funds— and therefore the time—to really put the work in.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]



[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

I have first-hand experience of the Foundation's continual support to make estranged and care leaver students' lives better. I'm very proud to now help deliver that for students of the future by joining the charity as a Trustee.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]



██████████

██████████

Throughout my studies, I've used the freedom the scholarship gave me to take every opportunity to build my skills, CV and portfolio of work. This is going to be so important when I leave university as I'll need to entirely support myself.

██████████

██████████



[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

I have benefited from the Unite Foundation scholarship by getting 3 years free accommodation and it has given me a lot of independence and respite from caring roles within my family. My flat is my safe space where I can focus on me, myself and my future.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]



The future of the Unite Foundation

Shân Wareing
Chair
Unite Foundation

At the Unite Foundation, we are unashamedly ambitious. Our vision is to ensure an inclusive and sustainable future in higher education for all estranged and care experienced students.

In celebrating our 10th anniversary, we are excited to build on the last ten years of listening to and working with the estranged and care experienced student community to improve the journey to and through university for everyone and ensure everyone feels equipped to secure a home at university and beyond.

We are starting to see recognition across a range of institutions and organisations of what can be achieved if we all do a little bit more.

Understanding of the kinds of changes which particularly benefit young people who have been in care or are estranged from their families, enabling them to go to university and successfully complete their courses, as well as feeling they can make the most of all the other experiences that university has to offer. We look forward to seeing the sector-wide recognition of the additional barriers young people without family support can face turning into widespread practical support that transforms the lives of these young people.

We want to champion these changes, but we know we can't do it alone; that's why we are setting out areas for improvement that we know will make a difference for care experienced and estranged students and how collectively we can come together to address how we will achieve these aims.

If you would like to work with us to improve the journey to and through university for all estranged and care experienced students, Unite Foundation's Director, Fiona Ellison, would love to hear from you.

Fiona.Ellison@unitefoundation.org.uk

Unite

Foundation