



Unite Foundation

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All of Us

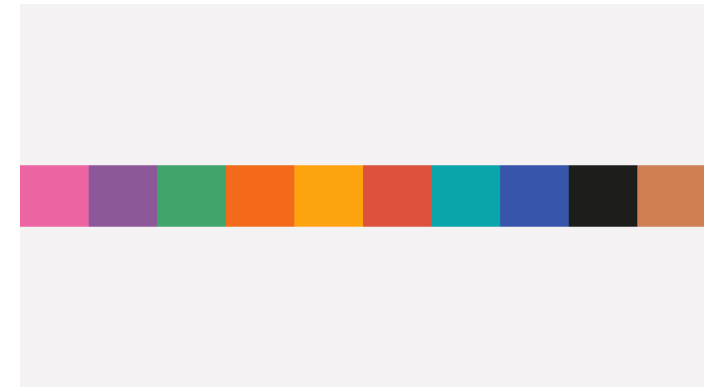
Building social connections amongst care experienced and estranged students; institutionally, regionally, and nationally.

All of Us

The Unite Foundation supports All of Us, the community for all estranged and care experienced students in Higher Education across the UK. The charity provides funding and dedicated team members who work hand in hand with the community to help everyone become better connected on and offline.

The community is united by its flag, co-created with estranged and care experienced students. The colours represent the diverse and dynamic community, flanked by the symbol of equality.

thisisusatuni.org / allofus.uk



All of Us

If you are creating events or meet ups for estranged and care experienced students, please apply the flag to any promotional material so that, at a glance, they can quickly see this is information that will be of interest to them. You can download it [here](#). If you need a version to use on a white background, please email safiyyah.hanif@unitefoundation.org.uk

Background

On 12th March 2024, Ira Hakim (All of Us Programme Manager at Unite Foundation) accompanied by PHD students Ikra Shabbir and Shaunna Devine delivered a workshop at the annual NNECL conference to discuss how HE staff think about ways they can best build connections and community for estranged and care experienced students.

This document captures top tips from over 50+ HE professionals from across the UK who attended the workshop and covers what's worked best, what hasn't worked so well, and some things to avoid!

We haven't named everyone in here but would like to thank you all for your contribution and hope it helps anyone thinking about ways to create connection between estranged and care experienced students.

Getting students involved in your plans?

- + “Find your champions and pay for their work!” Pay for their time/don’t take for free – consider using the [UK Real Living Wage](#).
- + Don’t pressure them to share their stories in a tokenistic way.
- + If students do share their stories for a university/college campaign (especially any recruitment drives), ensure they feel comfortable doing this.
- + Ensure they have support if they share their backgrounds as this can be traumatic or triggering, care experienced and estranged students have often lived through harrowing life experiences.
- + Make sure any feedback you get from them goes somewhere – we now have a booklet at Sussex written by CE/E students with top tips and a welcome pack with a weighted blanket, Tupperware and food vouchers.

“Be genuine, they pick up if you’re being fake.”

It’s okay to ask care experienced and estranged students for their opinions or to apologise if you get it wrong. Be honest with these students, although they are possibly more vulnerable than their peers, they are still adults with perspectives.

Consider perspectives

- + Include student perspective and actually listen to students, don't just wait for them to confirm what you already want to do.
- + Physically meet the students as a group and ask them what they need/want.
- + Include a community/belonging question in your student welcome surveys.
- + Some universities and colleges have set up a care experienced steering group to help guide decision making, in smaller institutions with less care experienced students you could widen the group to being a widening access steering group.
- + Meet your students where they choose to be, don't always expect them to come to you.
- + We've had life story workshops and staff training on awareness of challenges and barriers, also trauma-informed practice training. This helps us understand them better.

Issues identified

- + Students are reluctant to be identified as CE/E.
- + Students don't always tell staff they are estranged, or care experienced.
- + Definitions – care leaver v care experience, working out who to allow to events and how to keep it a safe space for a specific group.
- + Students nervous to make connections, fear of rejection and relationships.
- + Low engagement, offer activities but low or even no attendees.
- + Lack of consistency with staff sickness/turnover mean students get to know member of staff but then they leave.
- + It can be a challenge to be transparent with students around the funding issues/budget constraints we are under

Visibility

- + We run monthly 'check-in cafes' or drop ins (LJMU do this already) to allow students to pop in and ask you questions or meet other students from a similar background.
- + We provide our students with our card at the start of their academic journey with our named contact, email, office address and phone number on so they know exactly where to find us and how to get in touch.
- + We display the All of us flag in our window
- + We give the students a call pre-entry and when they first join to introduce ourselves, offer to meet in person and encourage them to link up with other students from a similar background.
- + Pre-winter break we do a call campaign where we check-in on all our CE/E students at the end of term 1 so they know we're still here (NTU).
- + Advertise events *really* well, including with physical posters on campus. This is important in general but also because it may help pick up students who haven't disclosed their care experienced/estranged status or who become estranged during their time in education at your college/university.

**“Profile the positives,
not just the problems.”**

Celebrate the fact these students have got to university/college and each year they continue. Challenge, support and celebrate. (St Mary's University)

Specific activity ideas: Part 1

- + Welcome event with food (always a winner) and helpful information about wider support available at your institution including chaplaincy, counselling, financial, pastoral, academic, mentoring, etc. Allow older students along too as this information can be a good refresher.
- + Run monthly 'check-in cafes' or drop ins (LJMU do this already) to allow students to pop in and ask you questions or meet other students from a similar background.
- + Hire a minibus and have a group IKEA trip at the start of each year.
- + Themed meetups around certain times of year, including religious festivals but also freshers, Summer, exam-season, etc. Formal dinner to celebrate graduation.
- + Fun nights, like Who Cares? Scotland game nights and board games
- + Collaborating with other local universities and colleges or even charities.

Specific activity ideas: Part 2

- + Get your current students involved in pulling together 'bottom drawer packs', or welcome packs for new incoming students, with something handwritten.
- + Connecting students up before winter, spring and summer breaks with pizza nights
- + Regular 'pub lunch'. Leeds have held a regular social for students over the last few years which has created a consistent pillar of support, that has grown into a lovely friendly activity and community.
- + We signpost them to support and then send a card, chocolates and a voucher to those staying over the winter break and give them the option to be added to a WhatsApp group chat with others who are also staying over (NTU).
- + When holding university events, we found that inviting care experienced or estranged students as ambassadors helped them feel they belonged here, and the paid work gave the time a focus.

“Don’t be demoralised by small numbers”

We’ve all been there! Focus on the quality of the interactions and less the quantity, which may grow over time with consistency. Yes, maybe only three people showed up, but that’s three people whose day/year/academic journey may have been made better because they found other people who get it, and it may mean they go on to complete their degree because they felt seen.

Attendance issues?

- + We found having a lower staff presence at events really helped students feel more comfortable, or even having us leave once we got the event going.
- + Letting the event be student directed where possible, or even student-led, gave a sense of ownership to them and made people more likely to turn-up.
- + We found that taking the meetups off-campus and making a day or a real event out of it increases attendance and engagement.
- + For events where we were spending more money, sometimes a deposit of £5 helped with commitment. (Although understand this won't work for all events).
- + Think carefully about when you're holding the event, what are the 'pinch-points' in the year, and will students prefer to be alone or social during these times?
- + Consider letting students who are nervous bring a trusted friend/partner to the event with them. This really helped our students who were scared to come out.
- + Advertising the event well through multiple communication channels helps.

Further ideas to encourage connection

- + Mentoring, buddying or peer-support groups for these students by older students from a similar background or WP.
- + Building trust 121 with these students, knowing them individually can help their buy in into showing up for events.
- + Although they share the experience of being care experienced/estranged there is a lot of difference and diversity. "You can't treat them as a pre-made group, you need to build the group."
- + Personal touches such as celebrating birthdays with a card and encouraging students to celebrate with each other. The same with graduation. (University of Sunderland and Kingston do this already, amongst others!)
- + Encourage them to get involved wider in their local student union/association and volunteering to build a bigger peer network/chosen family.

Support people in HE have told us they need

- + Peer support from other named points of contact and people working with care experienced and estranged students. The Unite Foundation will be creating one of these! Watch this space.
- + Buy in from 'higher ups', budget from senior leadership to do these activities.
- + Training on things such as trauma-informed practice and understanding disabilities/chronic health conditions, as these impact how students show up or are able to interact with community.
- + All of Us resources, physical and digital e.g. [#AllofUsLocal](#) guide

Helpful links

HE Christmas Guide <https://heprofessional.co.uk/edition/how-to-support-your-care-experienced-and-estranged-students-this-christmas-a-practical-guide-for-all-he-staff>

OfS 2022 <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/care-experienced/>

UCAS 2020 <https://www.ucas.com/file/513961/download?token=wAaKRniC>

Guide for Loved Ones <https://thisisusatuni.org/guide-for-our-loved-ones/>

Grief Resource (LGBTQ) <https://www.akt.org.uk/resources/grief-estrangement-lgbt/>

#AllofUsLocal <https://bit.ly/AllofUsLocal>



Thank you

The Unite Foundation
South Quay House
Bristol
BS1 6FL

0117 302 7073

info@unitefoundation.org.uk
www.thisisusatuni.org

The Unite Foundation
is a CIO registered in
England and Wales 1198601
Scotland SC05198