

# Estranged Students Solidarity Campaign Guide

## #WithEstrangedStudents

Estrangement is a huge issue affecting students, impacting on their mental health, finances and sense of belonging. NUS and Stand Alone have joined forces on an annual solidarity campaign for students who are estranged, raising awareness of the barriers they face and encouraging SUs and activists to increase their understanding and support for estranged students. Join the campaign this year and show estranged students on your campus they are not alone.

In 2010, NUS released our [Evaluating Estrangement](#) report, into the estrangement application process in higher education. Stand Alone is a charity that helps estranged adults in everyday life. We have partnered with them to create this guide, based on their research and information on the experience of estranged students.

### What is Estrangement?

Estrangement is when a person is disowned, cut off, or does not have a relationship with family or key family members. This can happen to people at any age, with 1 in 5 families in the UK affected and over 5 million people estranged from at least one family member. Estrangement can come with a lot of stigma, isolation, and emotional stress.

### Who are Estranged Students?

Estranged students are young people studying without the support and/or approval of a family network. Young people in this position often have no contact at all with their family and have removed themselves from a dysfunctional situation or been disowned by their family.

According to data from Student Loan Company

(SLC) there are over 9,000 higher education students identified as 'irrevocably' estranged from their parents and therefore receive full financial support from SLC. The data does not account for many estranged students who may not be registered and officially recognized by SLC. Data for Scotland is not yet available.

From the research carried out by Stand Alone, 79% of students surveyed become estranged before their 18<sup>th</sup> birthday. A majority of these cases were not overseen by local authorities or social services. This means there is a large number of estranged students who are vulnerable and have not received any tangible support.

### What are the causes of estrangement?

Key causes of family estrangement are abuse, particularly emotional, often alongside clashes of values and beliefs and mismatched expectations about family roles, and rejection due to being LGBT+. There are also a proportion of estranged students who have been disowned for pursuing education against the wishes of their family or extended family network.

## How does estrangement impact students?

Research and personal testimonies of estranged students show that it has a profound impact upon the person's emotional, mental and even physical wellbeing. It also has financial implications and impacts on their education and student experience during studies.

Students who are estranged or disowned from their family often feel unacknowledged, invisible and sensitive to judgement and stigma around their family situation. 28% of students in Stand Alone's study expressed that they did not feel comfortable accessing support within their institution. Either because they did not know how to access it, or because they had a lack of faith in services due to previous experiences of insufficient support or stigma.

There is also a large issue with retention. Stand Alone's research shows that 41% of students surveyed had considered withdrawing or suspending from their course due to money pressures, stress and mental health issues. 14% actually had, which is a rate three times higher than the average student drop out rate. This ties into a larger issue around interruption of studies, and the lack of support for students who are in struggling to stay on course.

Stand Alone have identified key barriers that affect estranged students including:

- Finance
- Accommodation
- Mental Health

### Finance

Research from Stand Alone shows that 61% of estranged students said they found the process of applying for student finance either 'difficult' or 'very difficult'.

To prove eligibility for additional funding, Estranged students are required to provide evidence to SLC to meet the eligibility criteria for financial support under the 'estrangement' category. Stand Alone has a useful [Guide](#) on their website to help with evidencing estrangement.

The funding offered through student finance is often not enough to cover expenses throughout the year, and many estranged students struggle during the summer months as a result. Students have attested that the loans offered 'barely cover rent' let alone other essentials, like food, and required equipment and materials for their course. Most estranged students find that they need to work long hours to supplement their living costs, which can have an impact on their ability to study, general social experience and overall wellbeing.

### Accommodation

Accommodation is a key issue for all students, however it is far more complicated if you are estranged. Halls can require deposits, large sums of money that most estranged students do not have readily available. Halls are also often only available during term-time, and must be vacated during holidays. This is difficult for estranged students who require a more stable, long-term living situation.

The alternative is renting in the private sector, which is often expensive (due to higher rent, agency fees and deposits). Most private accommodation also requires a guarantor from a family member or homeowner, which most estranged students do not have.

Estranged students, like LGBT+ students, are more at risk of homelessness. Their living situations can often be unstable and isolating. Students expressed that the stress often made them want to drop out.

### Mental Health

The impact of being estranged can have a large toll on a person's mental wellbeing. Estranged students are often already dealing with difficult experiences and abuse. This is compounded by a common experience of isolation and feeling of loneliness, especially during religious, personal and national holidays, and term-time breaks. Over 70% of estranged students report experiencing isolation.

Estranged students have to perform a 'balancing act' between paid work, education,

and any other commitments. The impact of working for money to stay in education means they have little time for studying, let alone rest, self-care, and socialising or extra-curricular activities.

Most estranged students tend to ignore their own wellbeing to 'pull through' and 'keep their heads above water'. They may have to re-sit assessments and even repeat entire academic years, which has further financial and wellbeing implications. This is further compounded when they identify as LGBT+, Disabled, Women or People of Colour, as the barriers in day-to-day life take a huge toll on mental health. Many estranged students find that those around them do not fully understand the complexities of their situations, and for this reason they often struggle to find support.

Most university counselling services focus on providing support for exam stress and coping academically. Many institutions often want to help provide specialised support but may not have staff who are trained up and confident to support on issues specifically affecting estranged students. Additional expertise is also required to provide culturally competent care, as estranged students may have complicated relationships with their race, religion, sexuality or gender.

## Take Action!

This section of the guide outlines ways that students unions, institutions and activists can take action to support estranged students.

## Estranged Students Solidarity Week

Estranged Students can be included throughout the year, but this year NUS and Stand Alone are organising Estranged Students Solidarity Week on **26<sup>th</sup> November – 30<sup>th</sup> November 2018** to reach out to students during difficult times and educate others. We encourage you to join us by running your activities throughout this week and make the issue of estrangement more visible.

The campaign should primarily raise awareness and educate on the issue of estrangement. We believe that breaking down the stigma is best done through open conversation. Panel discussions and supportive informal meet-ups are a great way to allow people to share experiences and challenge perceptions. We want you to stand #WithEstrangedStudents and you can do so by providing safe, private and comfortable spaces for them to socialise, seek advice, and allow their voices to be heard. You can find information and stats on estrangement in [Stand Alone's research](#) or contact Stand Alone for more information.

You can run the week how best suits you and your union/institution, but we suggest some of the following as ways to engage estranged students and their peers:

- Host an interactive talk/panel event on estrangement, asking student officers, staff, and even estranged students who feel comfortable to talk about the issue
- Tea/Coffee morning for estranged students (or those who may be considering estrangement) to meet others and find out how to
- Working with advice, finance, and other services at your institution to provide drop-in sessions for those requiring support
- Encourage clubs, societies, and students to organise Christmas/Hanukah/Holiday dinners or presents as a way to reach out to estranged students who may be alone during those difficult times
- Run a poster campaign and share other resources around SU and institution buildings, and also on website and social media
- Student Unions can also use this time to share any work they are already doing

## Don't Stop There!

Estranged students face barriers to success all throughout the year, and although raising awareness during this week is a great way to

spotlight particular issues and show solidarity, the work doesn't stop there. We've listed a few things that you can do in the long term, to ensure estranged students are receiving the support they need whilst in Higher Education.

### **Stand Alone Pledge**

The Stand Alone Pledge is a commitment made by a higher education institution to improve their support for estranged students studying without family support.

Stand Alone has a list of institutions that have taken the Pledge on the Pledge [website](#). Find out if your institution has.

If your institution has not signed the Pledge, why not contact students' services or widening participation (see [contacts](#) on the Stand Alone website) and find out who you could work with towards taking the Pledge. All information on how to do that is available [here](#).

If your institution has signed, the next step is to publicly promote it. Student Unions and institutions can share this information, on websites and via social media, and around campus buildings. This should include sign-posting to your institution's support services. Find out who the right member of staff is who can advise estranged students on support and work with them. Good times to promote the Pledge are during the application process, clearing period before new students arrive, and during Welcome Week. This ensures that students get information as soon as possible and publicly holds the institution to account and hold to their part of the pledge.

### **Including Estranged Students**

Reach out to clubs and societies, and include needs of estranged students in any training for committees. This is to ensure that they are accessible and promote engagement as many estranged students find it difficult.

SU's can also include the needs of estranged students in

- Social activities, e.g. coffee mornings, creative activities, film screenings,
- which are low cost, not based around alcohol and at different times in the day

- Social activities, for liberation and hard-to-reach students, to meet other like-minded students for connection and support
- Welcome week, including stalls and materials at fresher's fairs

There are also many ways you can integrate estranged student's issues in other campaigns. One example is to include estranged students in any campaigns targeting risk of isolation and loneliness. For example, Mental Health campaigns, which can include the isolation and mental health issues that estranged students may face.

Estranged students may define into any of our Liberation or hard to reach student groups. Hard-to-reach groups include: satellite campus, [International](#), part-time, mature students and student carers. The experience of oppression or other barriers can compound with the isolation of being estranged, therefore when targeting and supporting these groups, it is important to understand these barriers and to ensure that they feel included. NUS has many resources for how to support [Black](#), [Disabled](#), [LGBT+](#), [Women](#) and [Trans](#) students.

### **Difficult Times in the Year**

The holidays can be the most difficult and isolating times for estranged students, as they are often centered on family. This can include term breaks, but also religious and cultural holidays. You may want to link with faith groups on campus or in the local community, and support them in hosting or sign-posting events for students to attend. As a part of awareness, you may want to encourage organisation of meals or social events in accommodation and for flat mates. You can also suggest that students think about estranged students they may live with, making sure to reach out to them during these times.

### **Counselling Services**

Counselling services are and should be one of the frontline support services. However, many institution-based and NHS services are underfunded and oversubscribed. A campaign for SU's may be to lobby these services so counselling services are improved, funded, and

that counsellors are equipped to deal with the issues estranged students will be coming to them for. NUS has policy from the [Welfare](#), [Disabled](#), and [LGBT+](#) campaigns calling for adequate, well-resourced, and appropriate mental health services. In the meantime, counselling services should signpost any estranged students to relevant resources/services would be better.

### Peer support

Peer support can be a great way of tackling isolation and building relationships. We have already outlined the various ways students can support each other. However, it is important to note that any peer support programs should be an additional service and not sole source of support. Peer support volunteers should also be trained, be it with Mental Health First Aid or other forms of training to ensure that they are prepared and capable of actually supporting others. Stand Alone has information about setting up a facilitated peer support group on their [website](#).

### Hidden Course Costs

Hidden course costs are a large barrier for many students, and can negatively affect those who are estranged. Hidden course costs include any cost that is not immediately or clearly advertised. This is generally most other costs other than tuition fees, including but not limited to:

- cost of text books
- other course materials
- necessary equipment (from lab coats to access to a computer)
- printing
- cost of year's abroad (that are often advertised as no additional cost)
- other admin fees from university departments

Such costs can vary depending on institution, so you may want to run a campaign from your student union on hidden course costs at your institution.

### Examples of Best Practice

There are examples of best practice from institutions that have taken the Stand Alone Pledge across the country. We have included

these as suggestions for what you can do and what you can ask of your institutions...

De Montfort University provides estranged students with [a bursary of £1000 per academic year](#), which can be used to pay for vital costs and removed a large financial barrier.

One of Stand Alone's champion institutions, Liverpool John Moores University [recognizes the barrier's estranged students face](#), and now ensures that all of its accommodation partners will accept students without the need for a guarantor in certain circumstances.

Salford University has [clear support for estranged students](#), including their [PAUSE Group](#). PAUSE was started by an estranged student, with the help of a staff member, and allows estranged students to connect and support each other.

Another way student unions can help is by offering a guarantor scheme. By having such a system in place, the SU can act as a guarantor for any student when trying to access privately rented accommodation, therefore removing the need for a family member and the barrier for estranged students. An example of this is [Cardiff University Students' Union](#).

## Evaluation and Feedback

We would love to hear from you how your campaign went. Stand Alone will be in touch in early 2019 to find out about what you did and what the outcomes were. Feedback from estranged students is also really important.

## Support from NUS and Stand Alone

For information, advice and guidance on your campaign and similar enquiries please email [lgbt@nus.org.uk](mailto:lgbt@nus.org.uk)

For information, advice and guidance around estrangement and similar enquiries please email: [s.mueller@standalone.org.uk](mailto:s.mueller@standalone.org.uk)