



## Postgraduate support for estranged students by UK universities that have taken the Stand Alone Pledge

### Survey June 2021

#### 1. Background

Postgraduate study is an important element in the journey towards professional employment. Research indicates that the introduction of masters' loans in 2016/17 has increased the probability of progressing to a taught master's across socio-economic groups. As shown in a study into student loans and participation in postgraduate education<sup>1</sup> *'students from hitherto underrepresented groups were found to be reaching similar rates than their more advantaged counterparts after 2016/17'*.

But the new report published by the Sutton Trust<sup>2</sup> this June finds that *'tuition fee levels at UK higher education institutions for taught postgraduate courses have increased in the past 14 years, well beyond inflation'*. The report also states that although *'rates of progression from an undergraduate degree to a postgraduate master's have increased for graduates of all backgrounds since loans were introduced, graduates from less privileged backgrounds still appear to be less likely to progress than their better-off counterparts'*.

The report raises concerns of an *'ongoing gap between the cost of master's study and the resources available to disadvantaged students to pay those costs'* and suggests that *even without considering living costs a high proportion of postgraduate courses are unaffordable without recourse to other funding sources'*.<sup>3</sup>

Our own report 'What Happens Next'<sup>4</sup> published in 2019 identified that estrangement affects student's ability to continue into postgraduate study.

The need to find secure employment was a frequent theme in estranged graduates' transitions, and some undergraduates discussed being unable to pursue their career aspirations, missing out on postgraduate study or internships in order to secure work and start earning.

Estranged students who did pursue further study were concerned about the financial implications and costs of postgraduate life and also felt confused and misinformed about the funding available to them. Many struggled on low paid studentships without any additional support from their institution and could not afford to relocate when offered a place on prestigious postgraduate study programmes.

#### 2. Survey results

In June 2021 we asked universities that have committed to supporting estranged students through taking the Stand Alone Pledge about the level of support they offer to postgraduate estranged students.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/03054985.2020.1781607>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.suttontrust.com/our-research/inequality-in-the-highest-degree-postgraduate-access>

<sup>3</sup> <https://bit.ly/3qHZwk3>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.standalone.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Standalone-report-v3-1.pdf>

29 out of 90 universities responded to the survey (1 Welsh, 3 Scottish and 25 English).

The results are summarised as follows:

1. Identification of estranged students at PG level

8 of the 29 universities responded that they do not identify estranged students at PG level. The other 21 universities use different methods of identification including:

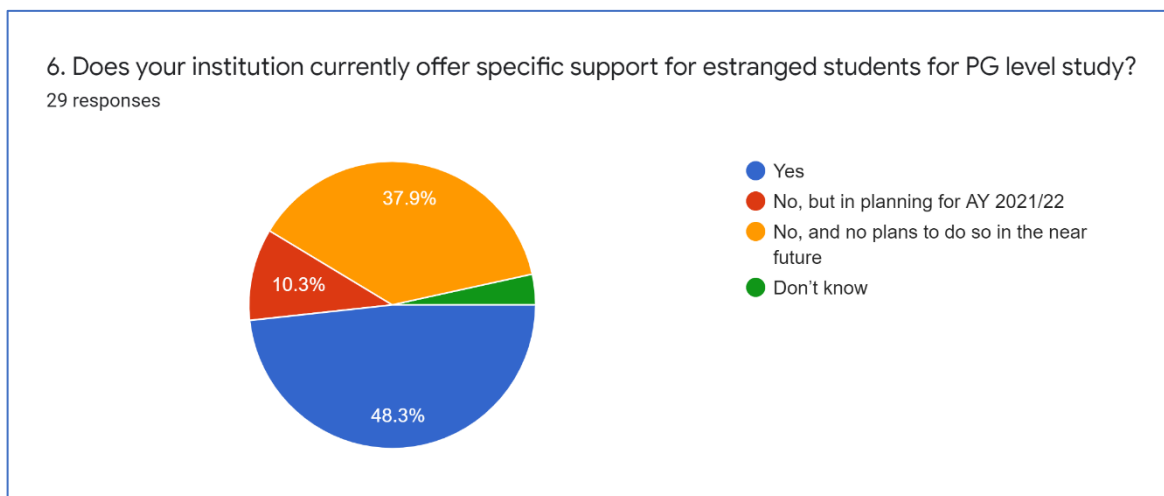
- Through self-disclosure (9 responses)
- At PG enrolment (7 responses)
- Internal referrals or progression (6 responses)
- UG evidence mainly from Student Finance assessment (4 responses)
- Via Masters Scholarship/Bursary (2 responses)

2. Definition of estranged students at PG level

Of those universities that identify estranged students at PG level, 16 responded in the survey that they use the same definition as for UG students (i.e. Student Finance definition) and of those 7 specify that students have to be under 25 years at the start of their PG course to be eligible for support.

3. Specific support for estranged students at PG level

Nearly half of respondents (13 universities) offer support for estranged students at PG level. And a further 3 universities stated that this is in planning for the coming academic year. On the other hand, there is no support currently or in planning for the future at 11 of the responding universities.



4. Support on offer to estranged PG students

Most of the universities that responded to this question stated that estranged postgraduate students can access the careers, mental health and general support services provided to either all other students or that for undergraduate estranged students.

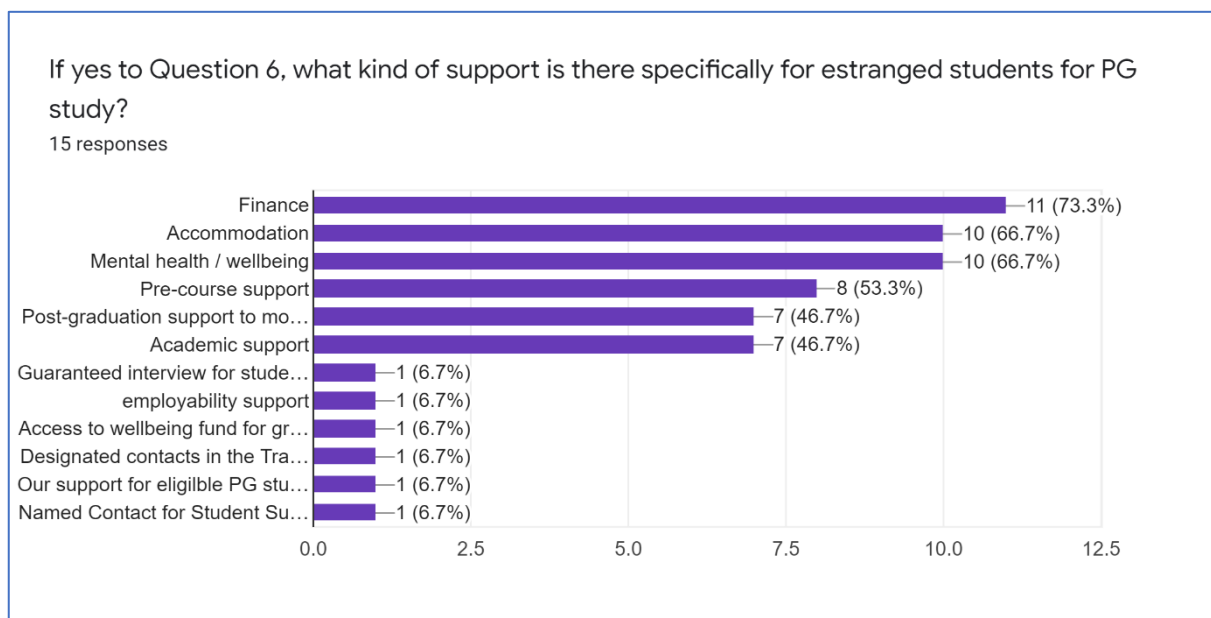
Where estranged PG are able to access support for UG estranged students this includes accommodation.

In terms of financial support, estranged students are entitled to a bursary at PG level at 7 universities with one of those being for PGCE. 2 universities specified access to Masters Bursaries.

*'Masters Bursary: Estrangement is currently considered under 'personal circumstances' but will be added as a specific priority criteria for 2021 entry.'* (University of Manchester)

*'Estranged students currently receive a higher score when applying for Masters Scholarships (though not guaranteed)'* (University of Leeds)

At 3 universities the PG support for estranged students does not include the UG financial package but students have priority access to other university funding streams or receive help to find alternative sources of funding.



## 5. Recruitment

Only 2 universities actively target estranged students in their postgraduate recruitment strategy.

## 6. Postgraduate study advice and guidance

Over 2/3 of respondents offer advice and guidance on post graduate study to estranged undergraduate students – both aimed at those progressing into PG study at the same university but also at new postgraduate students who are estranged.

## 3. Conclusion:

This survey is only a small window into the level of support for currently available to estranged for postgraduate study. But it indicates that these students' ongoing need for support, having completed their undergraduate study, to progress and achieve at postgraduate level is not widely recognised across the UK HE sector.

As one respondent put it: *I believe it* (i.e. lack of definition & identification of estranged students at PG level) *makes the assumption that estranged students on postgraduate study no longer require support!*

It is encouraging that some of the 29 universities who responded to this survey recognise that the provision they have in place for UG estranged students needs to be extended to postgraduate study. Where there is support in place estranged PG students, the type and level of support is currently not as extensive as that at UG level within the same institution.

The recommendations we made in 2019 in our 'What Happens Next' report are therefore still as relevant today as they were then:

1. Universities should offer estranged postgraduates the same supportive structures as undergraduate students, particularly those on low salaried PhD studentships.
2. Universities should offer transitional accommodation over the summer months for those relocating to start postgraduate education.

Following this short study, Stand Alone recommends more in-depth research to be undertaken

- into the level of support for postgraduate study for estranged students across UK HEIs to get a more in-depth picture of what is currently available.
- into what estranged students feel they need in order to have the same opportunities to progress into postgraduate study and be able to successfully complete their PG study as their non-estranged peers.
- into progression rates of estranged graduates into PG study and the impact of support / lack of support on their progression to and achievement at PG level study.

Susan Mueller  
HE Director  
Stand Alone  
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