



# NEW STARTS

The challenges of Higher Education  
without the support of  
a family network



2015

**Unite**  
Foundation

**StandAlone**

**This report brings together two pieces of research from the Unite Foundation and Stand Alone Charity, with the view to building a broad picture of the profile and key behaviours of care leavers and estranged students during their time studying in higher education.**

The report has been authored by Becca Bland, CEO of Stand Alone, and Jenny Shaw, Chair of the Unite Foundation with the input of the Trustees of both organisations. The authors would like to thank Lynne Condell, Student Funds Manager at Liverpool John Moores University and David Malcolm, Assistant Director at the National Union of Students for their helpful input. Stand Alone would also like to thank Student Loans Company Ltd (SLC) for taking the time to bring together the demographic data for analysis in this report.

## CONTENTS

3	<b>Unite Foundation</b>
3	<b>Stand Alone</b>
4	<b>Care leavers</b>
5	<b>Estranged students</b>
6	<b>About the research</b>
8	<b>Student financial support</b>
10	<b>Student location</b>
11	<b>Ethnicity</b>
12	<b>What happens in the holidays</b>
14	<b>A student home</b>
16	<b>University choice</b>
18	<b>Age</b>
20	<b>Employability</b>
22	<b>Student support</b>
26	<b>Conclusion</b>





**The primary mission of the Unite Foundation is to provide scholarships to students for whom a secure home is of particular significance.**

The Unite Foundation Scholarship Scheme provides free accommodation for the duration of a scholar's study, including summer accommodation, plus an annual cost of living allowance. The majority of students supported by the scheme have been in the care of local authorities, on the fringes of this provision, or are estranged from their parents.

The rationale behind this significant investment is the Foundation's aim to make a lifelong difference to individual lives, transforming scholars' circumstances to give them the best possible opportunity of success.

This research is an important way for the Unite Foundation to test its thinking and funding in these areas against a more defined understanding of the needs of its beneficiary students.

Stand Alone Charity supports adults of all ages who have become estranged from their family or key family members. The charity is working with the higher education sector to improve formal recognition for students who are studying without the support of a family network.

**Stand Alone's mission is to improve social inclusion and retention in higher education, and to ensure that family breakdown and dysfunction do not act as a barrier to access, achievement and success.**

Although these groups represent a tiny fraction of the student population as a whole, their progression through higher education is a clear sign that widening participation initiatives are working well and access to brighter futures are open to all.

This report, in collaboration with the Unite Foundation, will help Stand Alone raise awareness of both estranged students and care leavers, and help institutions understand the vulnerabilities of each group more thoroughly. Furthermore, Stand Alone hopes this work will help institutions protect the rights of these students as policy changes in widening participation are implemented in the sector.

# CARE LEAVERS

Other institutions have widened the scope to support the significant numbers of students who are not defined in this statutory sense, but who may have spent many years before their sixteenth birthday in the care system or have been cared for by a guardian. These students, who are not recognised as 'care leavers' do not qualify for the same support with accommodation during the holiday period or indeed the bursaries available from some local authorities.

**Any experience as a 'looked after child' or being placed in the care of a guardian or foster parent is indicative of a lack of parental stability. In some instances this would indicate that the student had experienced severe abuse or neglect in their childhood.**

Thanks to the tremendous work of Buttle UK, through their quality mark, over the last ten years there is now a greater awareness around care leavers in higher education. The quality mark initiative led a drive for the further and higher education sector to understand the background and the struggles of care leavers in accessing and completing their studies.

The term 'care leaver' has been interpreted widely in the sector. Some institutions have understood this group to be only those students defined as 'care leavers' by student finance or the local authority, who satisfy the qualifying condition of spending at least three months in care after their sixteenth birthday. However this definition is prone to exclude hundreds of thousands of children in the UK who are formally or informally placed in kinship care, who leave long-term foster care at sixteen, or who were 'looked after children' but do not qualify under the 'care leaver' definition as they were not in care on their sixteenth birthday.



# ESTRANGED STUDENTS



Estranged students often have unstable family backgrounds, similar to those of care leavers, but have removed themselves without the intervention of the local authority system. These students are considered independent in the view of SLC on a case-by-case basis, and the background of each student is carefully examined with references sought from independent trusted individuals.

**Research with estranged students indicates abuse, and particularly emotional abuse, are the key causes of family alienation, alongside clashes of values and mismatched expectations about family roles. More specifically, issues connected to honour based violence, forced marriage and family rejection of LGBTQI+\* and transgender students are common.**

\*Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer or Questioning, and Intersex

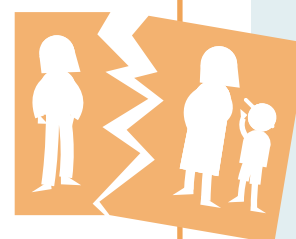
The struggles of these students and the dysfunctional nature of family life often go unrecognised by local authorities, and a forthcoming report from Stand Alone will show that there is a lack of any kind of social service intervention in roughly 60% of estranged student cases. Furthermore, over 30% were registered homeless or had considered registering homeless before their course began.

This low level of formal involvement is not necessarily indicative of negligence on the part of local authorities. Students who are estranged are more likely to remove themselves from a damaging situation between the ages of 16-19 than earlier in childhood. There are also known and accepted difficulties in evidencing emotional abuse and neglect, which may act symbiotically with the perceived shame and confusion that young people feel in identifying and disclosing psychological suffering during childhood.

Therefore it is very possible that students who are estranged or disowned from their family in this category may feel more open to judgement and stigma and may not have told anyone about their situation.

Students who are estranged are likely to remove themselves from a damaging situation between the ages of

# 16-19



# ABOUT THE RESEARCH

## Unite Students Insight Report Data

The Unite Foundation has drawn on a wider survey which was conducted during January and early February 2015 by the Research Team of NUS Services Ltd on behalf of Unite Students, the corporate sponsor of the Unite Foundation. The survey sampled three distinct populations: applicants (those applying to take up a university place in the 2015-16 academic year), undergraduates and postgraduates. Only data from the first two populations is reported here. The samples achieved were broadly representative of the relevant population as a whole without weighting (applicants and postgraduates) or with weighting (undergraduates).

	Survey total sample	Care leaver	Estranged
<b>Applicants</b>	2774	27	86
<b>Undergraduates</b>	4364	99	189

In agreement with Unite Students, the Unite Foundation obtained a cut of the data by care leaver and estranged student status, and made full use of the entire data set. Collection of data from estranged students was supported by Stand Alone who promoted the survey to their student database.



## Stand Alone Charity: Demographics

Stand Alone has obtained data for this report from SLC. It captures the numbers of students who are officially independent for finance purposes for reasons classified as 'estranged from parents' and 'care leavers' (by the statutory definition) who are between 18-24 years old.

SLC are responsible for processing Student Finance England/Wales/Northern Ireland applications for financial support. SLC have been working closely with Stand Alone with the ambition of understanding the barriers for estranged applicants in accessing financial support.

These figures anonymously describe the very basic facts about these populations and help us understand some key prevalence trends and characteristics. In the specific area of student homelessness, we have drawn on the preliminary results of the second stage of this project, whereby Stand Alone and SLC conducted an online survey, answered by 584 students classified as independent and 'estranged from parents'.

This data excludes those students accessing an NHS bursary for courses such as nursing or midwifery, students who are funding their studies independently and without assistance from SLC, or those who qualify under a different independent students definition, and students who are awarded finance by Student Awards Agency Scotland.

Furthermore, it focuses only on the students who have been successfully categorised as independent by SLC for reasons such as 'estranged from parents' and 'care leavers'. The anecdotal experience of Stand Alone would suggest that many more students may be estranged from their parents or are care leavers, but struggle to satisfy access criteria for classification as an independent student.

## Student Numbers 2013/14

# 9,338



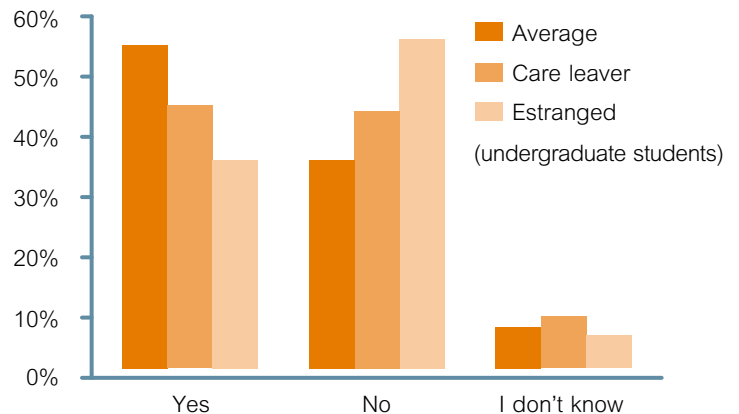
**students who are estranged from their parents received full support from Student Finance England, Wales and Northern Ireland.**

This shows the population of students who are categorised as independent and 'estranged from parents' is larger than those categorised as a 'care leaver'.



# STUDENT FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Is this [student finance] package sufficient to meet your living costs?



Source: Unite Students Insight Report 2015

The results for estranged students are the most statistically robust and show clear signs of financial pressure not experienced by the average student.

**Care leavers need to be 16 or over when leaving care to qualify for local authority financial and housing support.**

There have been significant advances made both at national policy level and by individual universities in support of care leavers over the last ten years. Local authorities have an obligation to provide financial assistance and housing for students who have left care, yet only approximately 60% of care leavers meet the strict definition applied by local authorities.

There is no local authority statutory support or recognition available to students who are estranged from their parents, and who have not been in local authority care. For these students, relying on the informal support of friends or extended family is often the only alternative to homelessness. This is still a significantly under-recognised issue, both in policy terms and in the public consciousness.

Undergraduates in the Unite Students survey were asked if the sources of funding and finance available to them were enough to meet their living costs.

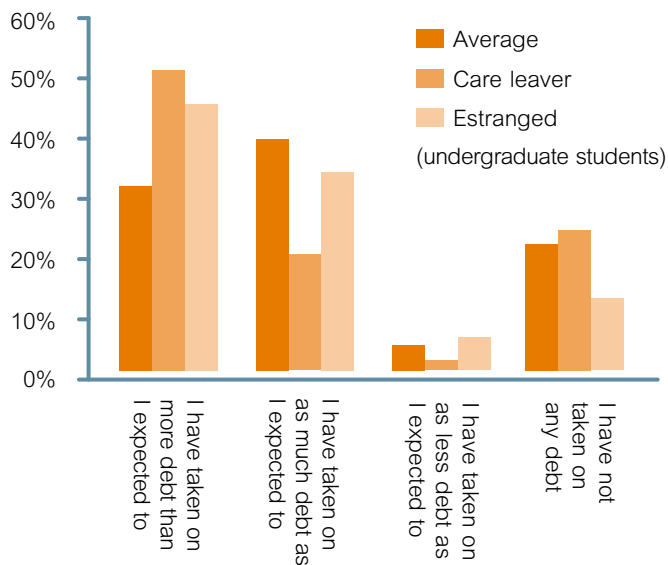
**“The highest amount possible to get from SFE is designed for those from low income families. It clearly has no provisions for those of us who have to rent privately during summer and Christmas periods and have no other means of acquiring money in an emergency, outside of paid employment.”**

Estranged Student, Norwich



When it comes to debt, there are signs of this additional pressure for both groups.

### Which of the following most applies to you?



Source: Unite Students Insight Report 2015

In this case, both care leavers and estranged students are statistically more likely to have taken on more debt than expected when compared with the overall undergraduate average.

**“All the literature provided at university explicitly states that your parents are expected to contribute financially. In the future, people like me won’t be going to university because it’s going to be too much of a financial risk.”**

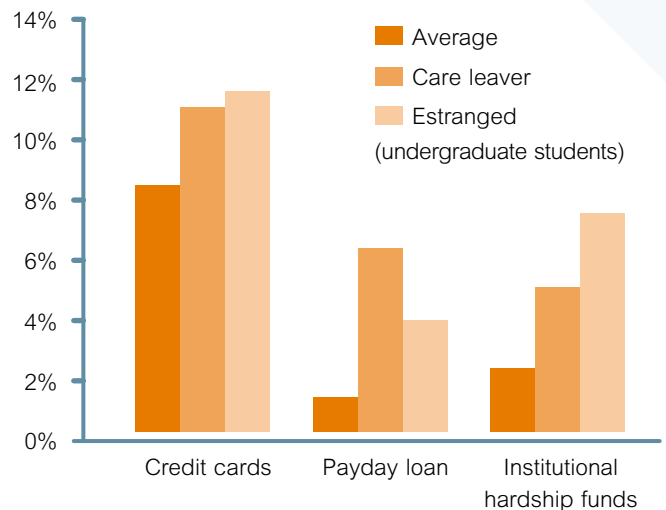
Estranged Student, Oxfordshire

**6.5%**

of care leavers resort to using payday loans whilst studying



### Which, if any, of the following do you use to finance your time at university?



Source: Unite Students Insight Report 2015

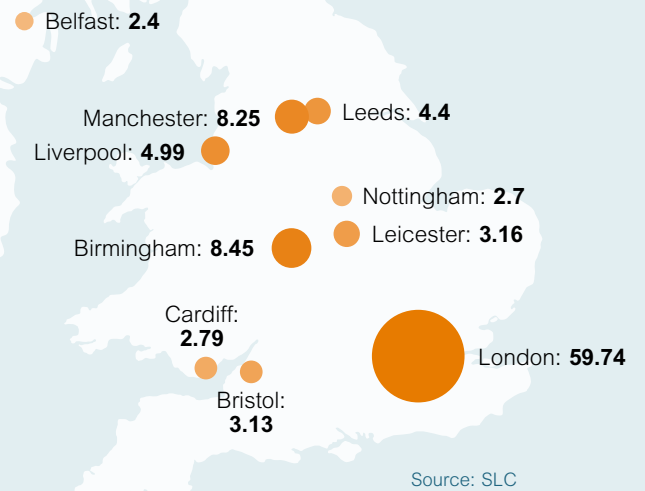
Institutional hardship funds are significantly more likely to be used by both groups – estranged students especially – providing further evidence of financial pressure. However, this does not appear to be enough to bridge the financial gap.

Both groups are more likely to use credit cards to pay for their time at university and worryingly, care leavers seem to be extremely vulnerable to high cost debt, with 6.5% reporting the use of payday loans. This is higher than any other identifiable group of students in the survey as a whole.

Despite the progress that has been made to provide targeted financial support to care leavers and estranged students, these findings point to an area of genuine financial exclusion that has not yet been fully resolved and there is still much to be done.

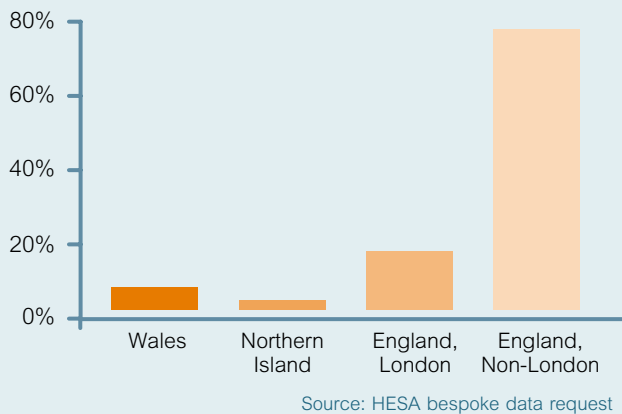
# STUDENT LOCATION

## Location of Independent students 2013/14 who are 'estranged from parents' accessing finance from Student Loans Company Ltd. [%]



Data from SLC acquired by Stand Alone suggests estranged students are more likely to be studying in the UK's largest cities, particularly London. 2013/14 data shows 59.7% of estranged students are registered in the London area, the second largest group in the Birmingham (8.45%) and the third in Manchester (8.26%). The data available shows this to be a stable trend over the years that the group has been measured. This is an inversion of the trend of the general student population where HESA data shows only 15.8% of students aged 18-24 located in London.

## Location of general undergraduate students 2013/14 aged 18-24 by region [%]



# 59.7%

of estranged students are registered in the London area



Buttle UK's 2013/14 Quality Mark annual statistical return confirms a similar pattern for care leavers, showing the highest percentages of care leavers in the student population study in the South East, London and North West of England.

This insight may throw more light on the financial struggles for both groups of students, who are predominantly residing in large urban areas, where the cost of living is higher and the total student support package may not be sufficient to meet higher rents, commuting costs, and inflated prices for food and entertainment. In many cases findings indicate that students often end up living with non-students and could pay extra bills such as council tax as they are included in the rent.

Further qualitative research with both groups of students studying in the capital is recommended.

**“In places like London, the support package is nowhere near enough to live on.”**

Estranged Student, London

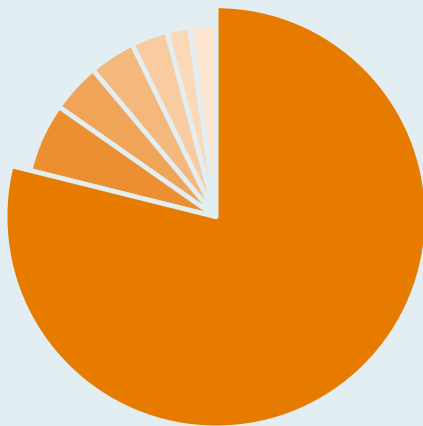
# ETHNICITY



Data from SLC on the ethnicity of care leavers and estranged students shows that both populations contain a larger percentage of black and minority ethnic (BME) students than the average student population.

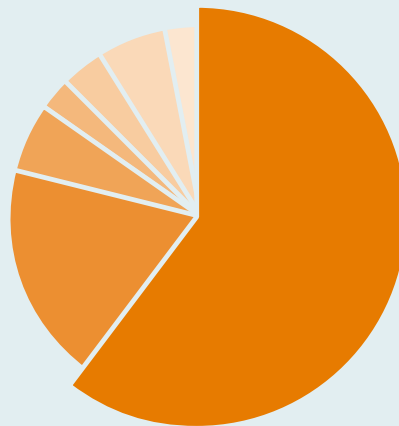
## All students ethnicity breakdown 2011-14 (%)

White, British: 72.97	Black, Caribbean: 1.89
Black, African: 5.41	Asian, Other: 1.8
White, Other: 3.83	
Asian, Indian: 3.6	
Asian, Pakistani: 2.85	



## Estranged students ethnicity breakdown 2011-14 (%)

White, British: 53.25	Black, Caribbean: 5.13
Black, African: 16.5	Asian, Other: 2.61
White, Other: 5.1	
Asian, Indian: 2.56	
Asian, Pakistani: 3.1	



2011-14 data acquired by Stand Alone from Student Loans Company Ltd.  
Ethnicity data volunteered at application stage. Source: SLC

These figures suggest that there are substantially larger Black African and Black Caribbean populations in the estranged students group in comparison to the average student population. All other ethnic groups show little difference between the two populations.

This breakdown may account for the uneven distribution of estranged students in large urban areas such as London, and the higher numbers of students from these groups in very ethnically diverse areas and universities such as East London.

It should be noted that this data is reliable to the point that it is drawn only from those students who volunteered their ethnicity data to SLC. This accounts for around 28% of applicants. Therefore further research is required to build on this initial snapshot and gain fully representative percentages.

# WHAT HAPPENS IN THE HOLIDAYS?

# 14%



of the 584 estranged students surveyed by Stand Alone and SLC had either registered homeless or had considered registering homeless during their studies.

The holiday periods are windows in which estranged students become particularly vulnerable, slipping between the net of parental responsibility and the responsibility of the local authority. These students don't have the traditional family home to call on over the holiday period or the provision of accommodation from the local authority as those defined as 'care leavers' may have.

This may contextualise why this group of students do not find their finance package sufficient to meet their living costs, as indicated in the findings from the Unite students Insight Report, as many of these students will be stretching their student loan over the summer months as well as the three university terms that the money is allocated to cover.

**In 2015, Stand Alone has so far received 61 enquiries relating to holiday period homelessness and funding summer accommodation.**



Experiences shared by  
Stand Alone beneficiaries:

**“It is approaching summer holidays and I have nowhere to live. The university have offered me accommodation but it is £90 per week, which I can’t afford as I am on a zero hour contract with my job. I am trying to study for exams, but constantly worrying about summer and what I’m going to do.”**

**“I’m currently homeless as my accommodation at uni has expired and I move into the next one in September. I have nobody to turn to for help as I was living in a hostel before I moved to my university.”**

**“I’ve been staying on my friend’s sofa and some nights in hostels because I just can’t afford to rent a room for 3 months what with the deposit, guarantor and rent in advance etc.”**

**“I was asked to pay my deposit for next years’ accommodation as well as September’s rent upfront just before term ended. I had a choice: either secure the new house, or have the necessities like food and rent to survive the summer.”**

# A STUDENT HOME

Accommodation is the largest cost a student needs to meet, outside of tuition fees, which are covered by a separate tuition fee loan. Students for whom staying in their family home is not an option cannot avoid this cost, and indeed will incur greater costs because of the need to house themselves during term time and throughout the summer holidays as well as between terms.

This is a particularly acute issue for estranged students who, as has been noted above, do not receive housing support from local authorities in the same way that statutory care leavers do. Many of the estranged students Stand Alone work with register themselves as homeless over the summer in order to become eligible for support. The Unite Students Insight Report highlights this: 14.8% of estranged student are worried about how they will afford their accommodation compared to an average of 8.6%.

**Student accommodation is about more than cost. The concept of 'home' is emotionally loaded for most students who are living away from their family. However, it is likely to be a much more anxiety-evoking concept for young people who have experienced a problematic or traumatic home and family.**

It is not surprising then, that both care leavers and estranged students showed different attitudes towards student accommodation and different patterns of behaviour compared to the average student population.

For the Unite Foundation this is especially relevant as, through our sponsoring partner Unite Students, we provide accommodation for 120 scholars for the duration of their studies, the majority of whom are care experienced or estranged. It is not enough simply to provide a room; to meet our ambition of having a transformative impact on scholars we also need to understand and meet their non-financial needs through the type of accommodation that is offered and the way in which the accommodation experience is managed.



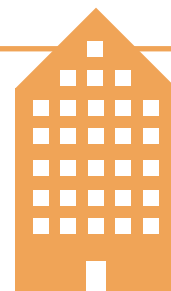
In the survey, applicants were asked where they intended to live in their first year at university. Some care needs to be taken in interpreting these results, as the sample size for care leaver applicants was very small.

Care leaver applicants are significantly more likely than average to say they will live in their own home in their first year at university. This is most likely to be because they have been provided with housing by their local authority and do not wish to lose it. The question then needs to be asked whether this is restricting university choice for care leavers.

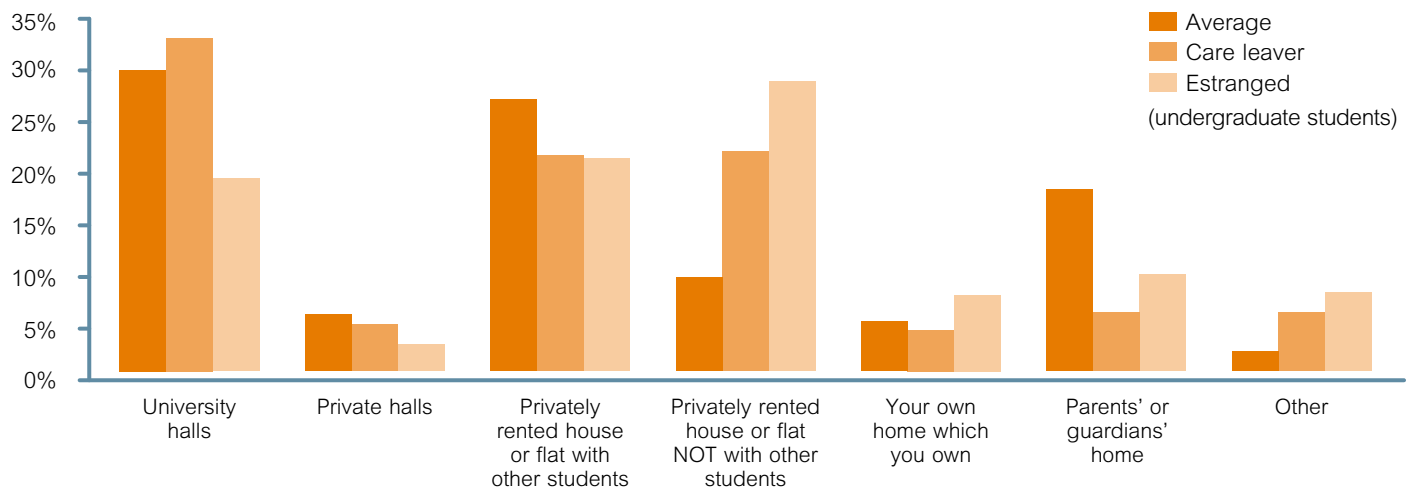
Estranged applicants, on the other hand, are significantly more likely than average to say they will live in a private rented house with or without other students, this is discussed below.

## 14.8%

of estranged students are worried about how they will afford their accommodation compared to an average of 8.6%.



## Where do you live?



Source: Unite Students Insight Report 2015

When it comes to the actual living arrangements of current undergraduates, the picture is slightly different.

Estranged students are significantly less likely to live in university halls, and both groups are more likely to live in private rented accommodation with others who are not students. A proportion were living in their parents'/guardian's home, which would indicate that other family members may be supporting these students.

The trends in rejecting student halls are likely to be linked to the requirement of both care leavers and estranged students for year-round accommodation, which is more readily available in private housing than halls.

This may also link to the significant deposits that students need to secure a place in halls in the months before starting university, and before receiving their student support package.

It is often difficult to meet such financial requirements without considerable savings and the support of a family network. There is the added difficulty of securing a guarantor for students in some halls of residence as this is often a parent. Both of these aspects could be seen as deterrents for care leavers and estranged student groups in securing a place in university accommodation.

**“I rent a room from the parent of my friend. This way I know the landlord and it is affordable, which as a student with no parents or a guardian is very important.”**

**Estranged Student, London**

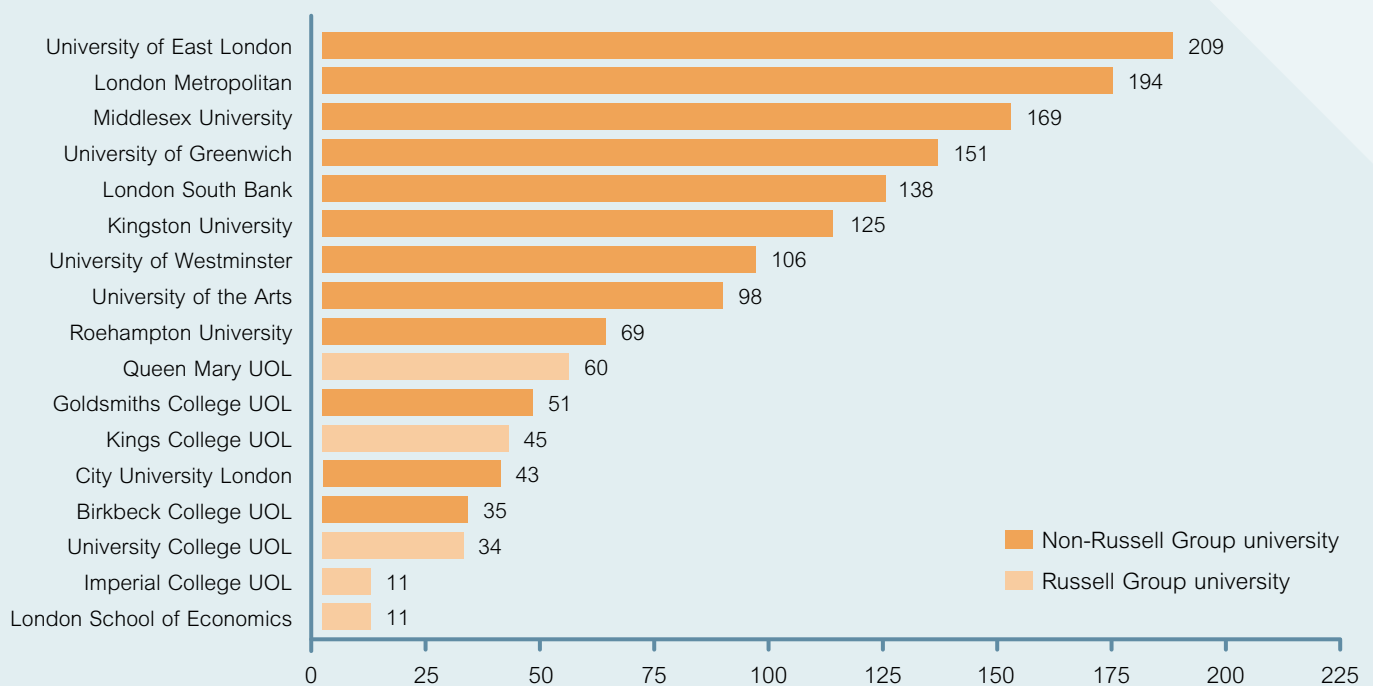
# UNIVERSITY CHOICE

Students who are 'estranged from their parents' are most often choosing newer universities over Russell Group institutions.

Demographic data shows an interesting picture of the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) estranged students are choosing. The demographic dataset indicates large numbers of students preferring recruiting universities than those institutions with an established research reputation.

This affirms trends described by Buttle UK in 2013/14 Quality Mark annual statistical return, indicating lower rates of care leavers at Russell Group universities, and higher numbers at newer institutions.

## Number of independent students 'estranged from parents' in London Universities 2014/15



Source: SLC

**5 in 10,000**

students in Russell Group Universities are reported as 'care leaver' students

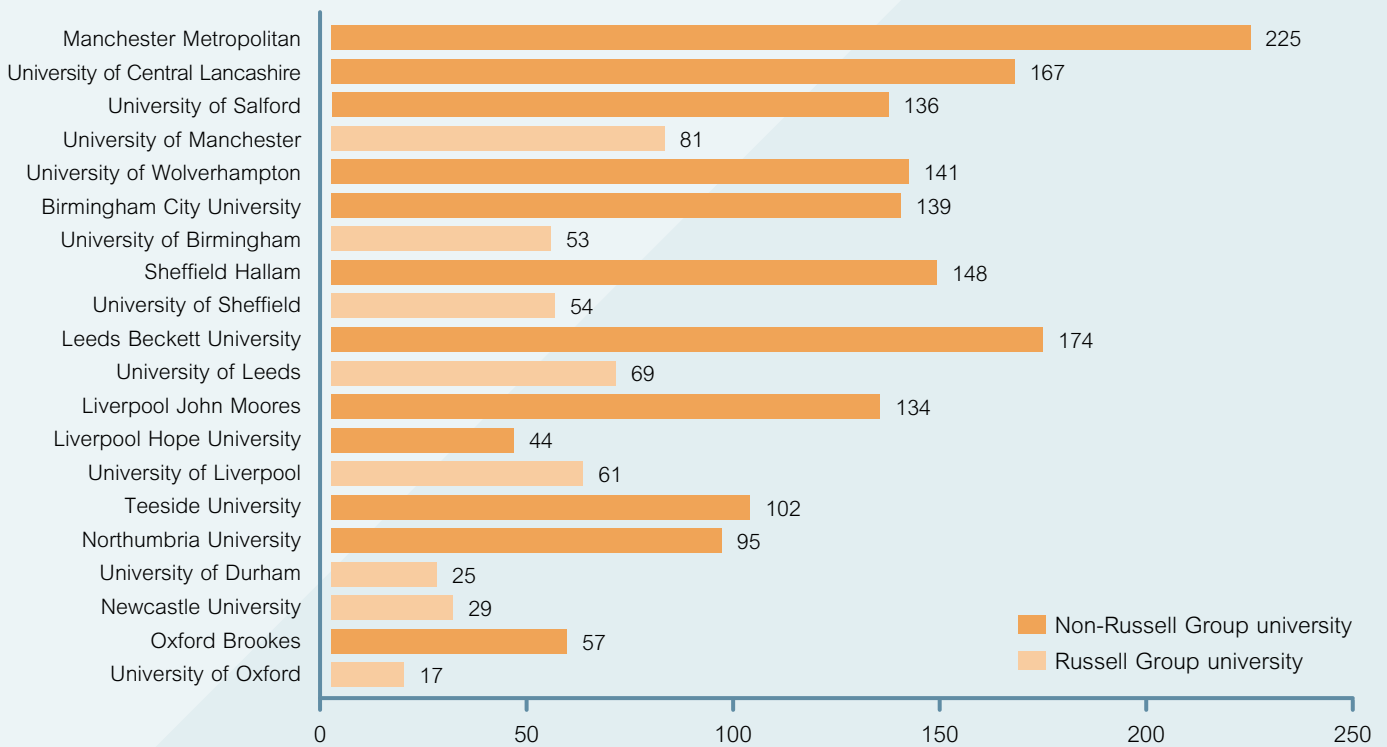
**19 in 10,000**

students in non-Russell Group Universities are reported as 'care leaver' students

Source: Buttle UK

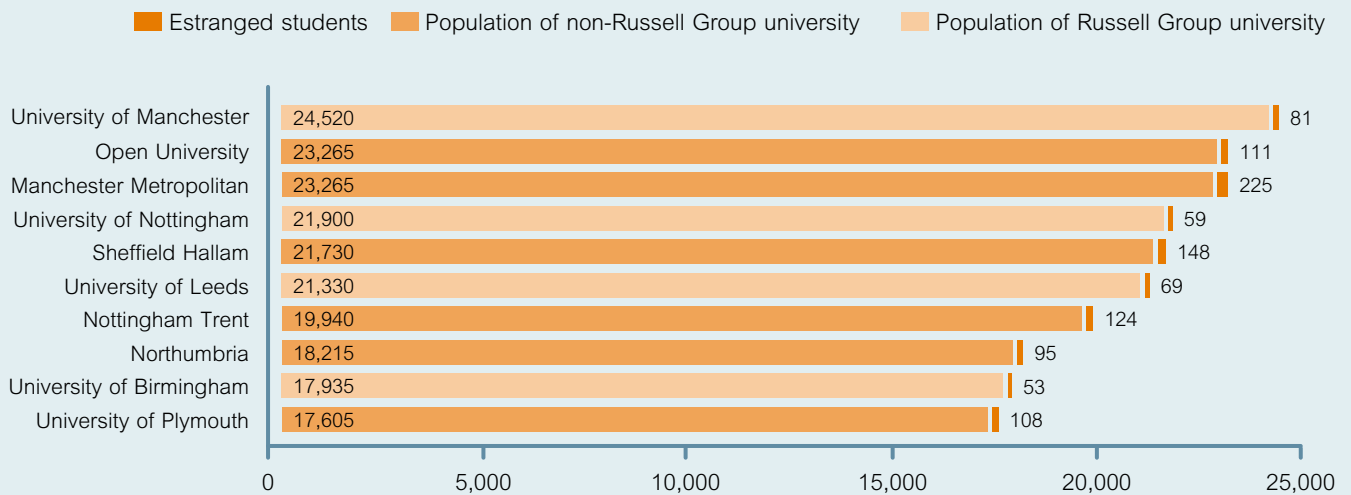


## Numbers of independent students 'estranged from parents' in metropolitan area Russell Group and non-Russell Group Universities outside of London 2014/15



Source: SLC

## Largest general population undergraduate student numbers aged 18-24 v 2014/15 Estranged student population numbers



Source: HESA and SLC

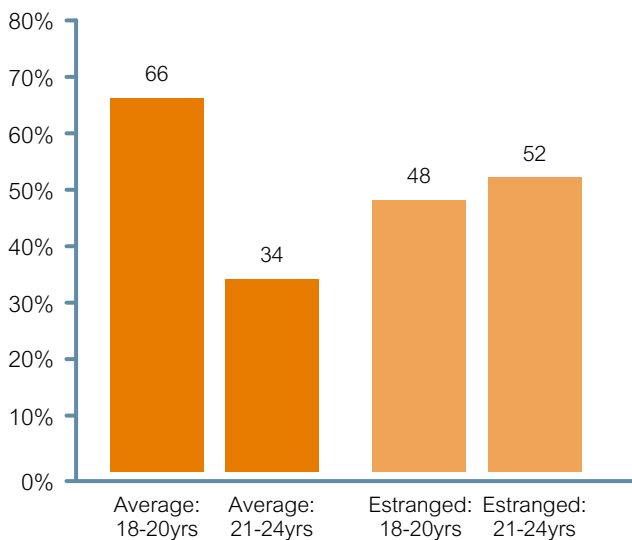
There may be many reasons for the preferences for non-Russell Group institutions, but the criteria by which students select their institution is likely to be one of them. As it will be discussed below, the perceived amount of support provided by the institutions is of greater than average significance to estranged students. This by no means indicates that Russell Group institutions do not provide adequate student support, but more that the student support available at Russell Group institutions may not be accurately perceived.

Furthermore, students with the absence of a family may believe that they lack the social capital or confidence to apply to a higher tariff university, especially if they perceive their experiences may separate them from their peers or their education has been disrupted. It is also possible that students from both of these groups have a disrupted experience of education, and therefore may find it difficult to achieve the results needed for highly competitive courses. This is an area that would be useful to explore further both with students and institutions.

# AGE

2014/15 SLC data acquired by Stand Alone shows that 52% of estranged students are between the ages of 21-24. This is a higher percentage than the average student population of undergraduates under 24, where HESA data shows only 33% of students are between the ages of 21-24.

## The age of students in the general population vs students classified by SLC as 'estranged from parents'



Source: HESA and Student Loans Company Ltd.



This trend has been echoed by Buttle UK's 2013/14 Quality Mark statistical return, showing that 41% of care leaver students in Quality Mark universities are aged 20-24 years old.

**These figures indicate that estranged students are not accessing higher education immediately after school or further education.**

Although it is difficult to draw firm conclusions as to the reasons given, financial concerns may contribute to the decision to enter education later.

## Does age make a difference when it comes to accommodation choice?

It has been noted earlier in this report that these groups of students are less likely than average to be living in student halls. It's difficult to be conclusive without further research, but it is possible that students who are slightly older may already have settled living arrangements in place with trusted friends, partners or guardians.

This may be particularly true for the large numbers of these students who are studying in London, where fewer students generally take up places in halls of residence. For care leavers, they may be living in local authority provided housing, which they may be reluctant to give up for a place in halls of residence.

All these findings point to complex and emotionally loaded constructions of home for students who have been in care or are estranged. These subtleties of attitude are not always easy to explain, but nonetheless need to be taken into account by universities and accommodation providers who are serious about improving access to higher education for these groups.

Further qualitative research with both of these groups would be useful to help bring a depth of understanding to these theories.

## Both groups also show some distinctive attitudes when it comes to student living:

**Care leavers living in halls are less likely than average to want social events organised by other students in their accommodation.**

**Estranged students who live in university or private halls are more likely than average to want a buddy or mentoring system in their accommodation, but less likely to want information about who to talk to if they have a problem.**

**Care leavers are more likely than average to say they find living in shared accommodation harder than they thought it would be.**

**Estranged students are significantly less likely than average to say they miss living at home with their family.**

**When choosing their accommodation, the availability of green space was significantly more important to care leavers than average.**

# EMPLOYABILITY

Preparation for future employment is front of mind for most students, but is perhaps even more critical from groups who are under-represented and/or may face additional financial pressures. An important question in the widening access debate has more recently been “access to what?”, prompting a greater focus on outcomes after graduation.

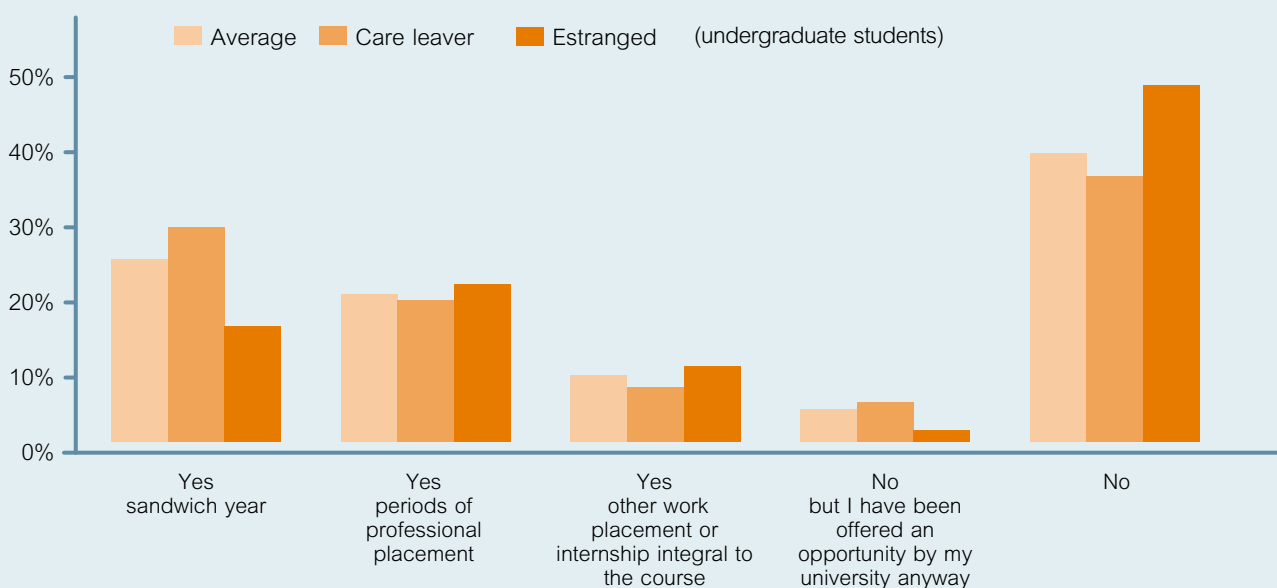
The good news is that care leavers and estranged students in the survey were not statistically any more or less pessimistic about their chances of finding a job once they graduate than students on average. However, when it comes to intentions on graduation, estranged students are more likely to say they intend to be unemployed and less likely to say they will travel or take gap year. Although the absolute percentages for these are small, nonetheless it suggests that some students may be opting themselves out of future opportunities.

When it comes to seeking advice about choosing a career, both care leavers and estranged students are significantly less likely to say that they will seek outside advice and support. Possibly, this is linked to experiences of being independent at a relatively early age. The primary difference between these groups is their ability to seek advice from parents or guardians.

Given the lack of access to advice and support from parents, it could be expected that university careers services would play a stronger role in supporting these students. It is possible that there is more that careers services could do to reach out to care leavers and estranged students and overcome what appears to be a slight reluctance about taking any external advice and support.

Students in the survey were also asked about work placements and internships. Estranged students were less likely to have access to work placement opportunities than students on average, though this same pattern was not seen among care leavers.

## Does your current course offer an integrated work placement opportunity?



Source: Unite Students Insight Report 2015

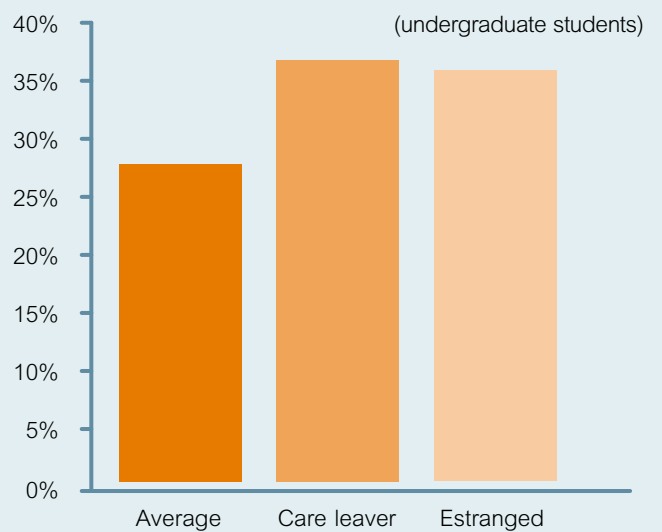


The main difference seems to be among those who have access to a sandwich year, and this may be linked to course choice.

Among those who did not take up a work placement that was offered to them, estranged students were significantly more likely than average to say that this was because they couldn't afford the accommodation. It should be noted that the sample size here was extremely small.

Volunteering rates were higher among the two groups than among students as a whole.

### Volunteering rates



Source: Unite Students Insight Report 2015

Volunteering is undoubtedly providing these students with valuable work experience, but this is probably not the main motivator. The data further reveals that care leavers and estranged students are much more likely to volunteer for national or regional charities than average, whereas their volunteering rates in their university and local community are the same as average. A reasonable hypothesis is that they are volunteering for organisations that are significant to them, as a way of supporting others in similar situations. Anecdotal evidence from Unite Foundation scholars supports this hypothesis.



# STUDENT SUPPORT

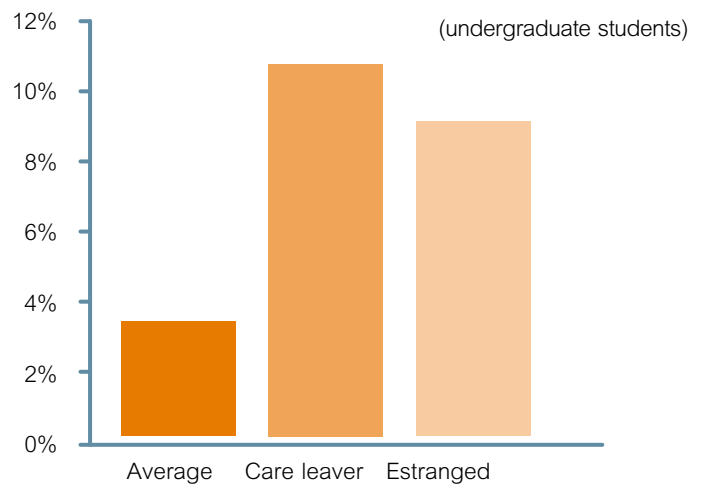
There is much evidence to show that care leavers are significantly less likely to go to university than students on average, for example Buttle UK's 2013 report 'Assessing the Impact of the Buttle UK Quality Mark in Higher Education'. There are no comparable figures for estranged students.

Once the decision to go to university has been made, the Unite Students data shows that neither group has significant differences from the average in their reasoning for going on to higher education.

**When it comes to choosing a specific university, both care leavers and estranged students use slightly different criteria than students on average. The most striking difference is a greater desire than average for a support network.**

From a choice of 11 items, "the university offers the level of academic or student support that I need" was chosen as the most important criterion when selecting a university for 3.4% of undergraduates overall, whereas 9.1% of estranged students and 10.8% of care leavers chose it as their primary reason.

Why did you choose the university that you did? Students choosing "It offers the level of academic or student support I need" as their first choice from a list of 11 items

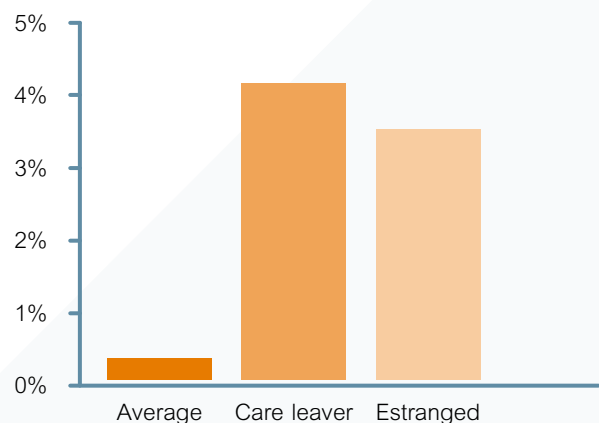


Source: Unite Students Insight report 2015

The same pattern is found among care leaver applicants in the same study, though not estranged applicants.

Having friends going to the same university was more important than average to applicants who have been in care or are estranged.

Applicants reporting their first motivation for choosing a particular university is that they have friends going to the same university

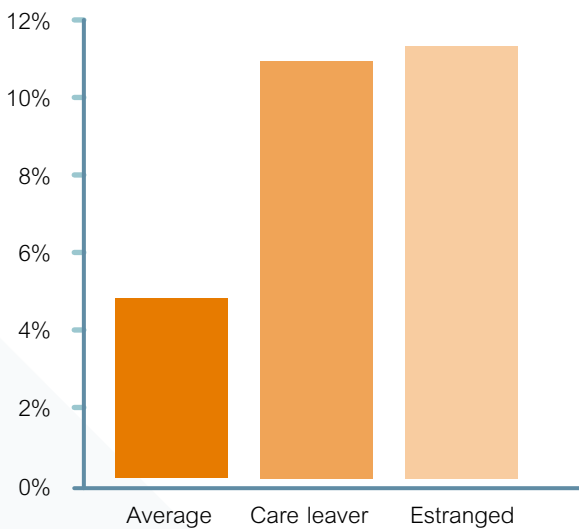


Source: Unite Students Insight Report 2015

This could potentially play a significant part in choice of accommodation, and the desirability of privately rented accommodation if shared with friends. The rejection of halls of residence also implies the rejection of this type of accommodation as a tool to make new friends, a new support network and a new start.

Undergraduate students were asked to select from a list of 14 factors which one was most important to them as part of their university experience. Care leavers and estranged students both showed a significant difference from the average when it came to selecting “excellent support from university staff” as the most important factor. This difference is illustrated in the graph below.

Percentage of students choosing “excellent support from university staff” as the most important factor in their university experience



Source: Unite Students Insight Report 2015

None of this should be surprising. For students who have no or limited family support, building themselves a support network while they study, whether through friends or university staff, is a natural thing to want to do.

Many universities provide additional support through peer mentoring, mentoring by staff and designated contacts, especially those universities who have achieved the Buttle UK Quality Mark. The level and quality of provision inevitably varies, but most institutions at least now understand that this is important.

**“Estrangement can be a touchy issue and can often be the subject for scepticism. My student advisor made me feel comfortable in sharing my background and assured me that I could get the help that I needed.”**

Estranged student – Kent

For estranged students, specific arrangements such as these are far less common, and yet the level of need is just as acute if not more so considering the lack of local authority assistance for these young people. Furthermore, the systems that automatically identify care leavers for a higher education institution are currently not set up to identify estranged students in the same way.

The predicament of estrangement can lead to barriers for university support services in identifying such students, who often feel stigmatised and ashamed when explaining their choices and lack of family support.



# STUDENT SUPPORT

Stand Alone has found that societal knowledge and awareness regarding family estrangement and disownment is currently low but, conversely, stigma is high. We found that staff in student support service roles do fully understand the difficulty of family estrangement and do everything they can to support students. Our concern centres not only on the vulnerable students and their welfare but also on the pressure that staff may feel to be a surrogate parent for estranged and care leaver students. We are keen to work with the sector to build awareness on how staff are supported with the expectations that come with being such an anchoring role.

**The need to cut contact with a family network is often not officially recognised in many areas of society. This lack of recognition has led to a critical lack of support for young people.**



**“I’ve been estranged from my parents for over a year, and had a troublesome relationship with them for years prior to that due to emotional abuse. It’s incredibly difficult to be independent at the age of 19-20 and being thrown in the deep end. I spent many months being homeless and sleeping at friends’ houses, relying on the goodwill of others. It has been hard to afford the more expensive books for my course and often I missed important reading as the textbook was loaned out or in use at the library. I can’t help but feel so different and abnormal, as everyone else here seems to have such a good relationship with their families. It hurts the most during holidays, and when term finishes, as obviously I can’t just pop home for the summer”.**

Jessica, University of Sheffield





## Case study: Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU)

“Liverpool John Moores University has been offering a range of support to students who are estranged from their families for many years. The university was awarded the Buttle UK Quality Mark for the support for Care Leavers in 2008 and the support for estranged students follows the same model and principles, offering a bespoke support package such as a bursary, mentoring and accommodation 365 days a year.

In 2010 in recognition of the additional support that these groups of students may require, the University took the decision to employ a dedicated member of staff to support the needs of vulnerable students such as care leavers and those that are estranged from their families. The role is based within Student Advice and Wellbeing Services, and works with students throughout their time at the university, providing ongoing advice and guidance and facilitating access to other relevant support services such as counselling, mental health and disability support).

**“Through this dedicated role, the university has been able to identify and support students prior to their enrolment to ensure a smooth transition to student life.”**

A number of estranged students are identified via the collaborative work undertaken with accommodation partners, such as those needing a guarantor or a deposit, and these students would be referred to the Student Support Coordinator for assistance.

LJMU has been fortunate to work with the Unite Foundation since 2013 and offers the Unite Foundation Scholarship to five students each year. The university identified young people who are estranged from their families as the priority group for support through the scheme.“

# CONCLUSION

Levelling the odds for students who face disadvantage is a complex business that requires a broad partnership, including with the students themselves. But good policy also needs to be based on good data.

Over the last ten years a body of data has been built up about the needs, attitudes and lived experiences of students who are care leavers, and we hope that this report will add to that knowledge base.

However, research into the equivalent needs of estranged students is still in its infancy. We hope that our research will raise awareness of the unique needs of students who are estranged from their parents, and Stand Alone is soon to publish two further reports and more extensive research into this new but important policy area.

**The future of widening participation looks uncertain with the announcement of the changes of maintenance grants into loans for the poorest students. It is yet to be seen whether this will obstruct students who are studying without the support of a family network, who would be required to take on up to £55,000 in order to study.**

**We must not forget that the poorest students in our society are often those studying without the emotional or financial support of their family.**

Whatever changes are ahead, we are certain that both our organisations will continue to see the critical importance of helping students without the support of a family network to access opportunities to achieve, and ensure their difficult family background is not a disadvantage and doesn't limit their rights to an education.



## Recommendations

As a result of the research presented in this report, together with the experiences of both organisations and their partner universities, we offer the following recommendations

### For the Office for Fair Access:

- Provision of guidance information for HE institutions on including estranged students in their access agreements, in the same way that guidance is currently provided for institutions who wish to include care leavers.
- A thorough impact assessment and consultation on the changes to maintenance grant payments on the access implications for students who are studying without the support of a family network.

### For Department for Work and Pensions:

- An impact assessment of extension of eligibility to housing benefit for vulnerable student groups over the summer period.

### For Student Loans Company Ltd:

- A consultation to explore how 'care leavers' are best defined and to consider extending this definition to those with special guardianship orders and those students who have been in the long-term care of foster parents.



### For HE Institutions:

- A dedicated support worker in student services for estranged students, who would act as their first point of contact, and raise awareness around their needs across the institution.
- Clear communication of the level and type of support offered by institutions to students studying without a family network during the application stage. This may also include an enhanced level of 1-1 support during the application period as well as marketing that is broad enough to draw in students who are leaving care and those who have informally become estranged or disowned from their family network.
- A structured approach to addressing the risk of summertime homelessness and/or financial stress for all students who are likely to require summertime accommodation. This could include summer housing at a discounted rate, guarantor assistance and/or a dedicated bursary pot to help with the payments of deposits or bonds. This support should take into account the living preferences of estranged students.
- A monthly CBT style therapeutic support group to help students who are studying without a family network to build social connections, develop key coping skills and generate wellbeing and mental health strategies for periods of financial stress.
- Targeted outreach measures to engage care leavers and estranged students with careers and employability services, particularly paid internships. Volunteering could provide a point of engagement, as the research has shown that students from these groups are more likely than average to volunteer.
- Consultation with care leavers and estranged students themselves as part of the process of designing services to meet their needs.

### For researchers:

- Further qualitative research into the lived experiences of care leavers and estranged students studying in London.
- Additional quantitative research on the ethnicity of care leaver and estranged applicants in order to build up a more comprehensive picture, as the currently available data is not sufficient to be conclusive.
- Further research into the meaning and significance of 'home' in relation to student accommodation for estranged students and care leavers, with an emphasis on guiding universities and other accommodation providers to offer appropriate accommodation opportunities for students from these groups.
- Further quantitative and qualitative research into the impact of formal and informal homelessness and estrangement on the academic success of students aged 16-19 years old.
- Further qualitative research on the impact of family support on social aspiration and academic success in higher education.

**Unite**  
Foundation

**StandAlone**

The logo icon for StandAlone consists of a central black circle with several lines radiating outwards to smaller circles, resembling a network or a stylized atom.

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