

ESTRANGED STUDENTS IN HE: FINDING A SENSE OF HOME

Stand Alone Student Voice event at Scottish Parliament 18 Sept 2019, hosted by Gillian Martin MSP



Speakers:

1. Becca Bland, CEO of Stand Alone outlined the main asks to Scottish Government for estranged students:

- **Parity with all young people under 25 years for estranged, independent students for access to bursary**
- **Parity with care-experienced students for summer accommodation grant**
- **Scottish Government to establish a guarantor scheme for Scottish domiciled HE students**

2. Liam McCabe, NUS-Scotland President called on the audience to recognise the responsibility of the education sector as a whole in identifying the “impact of estrangement” on students to enable them to “realise their potential”. He underlined that there is a need to provide for those estranged in Scottish HE a “sense of belonging” and the opportunity for an “equal chance of succeeding”.

NUS-Scotland are currently working on developing a campaign asking for a guarantor scheme to be available by every HE and FE institution in Scotland and for it to be added to Outcome Agreements as a requirement.

3. Prof. Yvette Taylor, University of Strathclyde, introduced the newly published research in the Cambridge Educational Review: Estranged students in higher education: navigating social and economic capitals.

Read Abstract here: <https://bit.ly/2omGzY5>

Prof. Taylor highlighted two aspects from the research: the negative consequences of experiencing estrangement in HE that stood out were homelessness and isolation leading to “stigmatisation and shame”. On the other hand, there were also positive consequences of estrangement: students

demonstrate resilience and independence in navigating the 'Estrangement Challenge' of overcoming the hurdles and barriers that they are faced with.

Panel:

A Panel of four current estranged HE students gave an insight into their experiences of the challenges they face on a day-to-day basis.

1. Transition to University

Student A talked about her false perception of higher education being free education. She found herself struggling in particular with accommodation on starting HE and has done so throughout her studies.

Student D saw "HE as a getaway" from the family situation.

Contextual admissions: Student B was discouraged by her school and told she was wasting her application on a medical degree. She didn't make the grades required for entry onto the medical course. But when she was asked by a university tutor in interview on application "Why couldn't you make the grades?" she explained her circumstances and was accepted.

Student D raised the need for SAAS to be a more responsive system that reflects changing circumstances within the student lifecycle and the recognition of estranged students being 'independent' below the age of 25 yrs.

2. Accommodation, Guarantors and Deposits

All four students found it impossible to find a guarantor without contact to family and other professional people. Student C felt ashamed of her situation which meant she needed to find a guarantor. This led to her being "close to dropping out".

All students also talked about the near impossible task of finding enough money for a deposit for a rental property. Without parents to fall back on are were financially dependent on what they can earn which is not sufficient to be able to save up for a deposit. Consequently, all four students found themselves in low-quality accommodation, often in unsafe areas of the city or at a substantial distance from their university at stages throughout their studies. Student D had no choice initially than to squat illegally.

For all students moving house is the most stressful experience as "you have to do it all on your own". For Student D that meant not moving any further than "being able to carry my things".

They all agreed that at times their studies are affected by not being fully self - sufficient and the "always looming threat of becoming homeless."

Two of the students also spoke about their fear of abusive parents they are trying to distance themselves from tracking them down and the threat of family coming back to abuse them. "I don't feel settled anywhere. I don't have a sense of home. Partly because I am afraid my parents will find me."

Although students all welcome the offer of 365 days accommodation provided by HEIs, student accommodation is only temporary. They called for universities (and colleges) to create safe accommodation or help students to access such. For ex by working with housing associations.

3. Crisis Points

During the summer period all students need to access discretionary funds from their university as they have to stretch their finances to last through to September. They highlighted feeling “guilty” for asking for support and discussed that this arises from issues about asking for money from abusive families.

Loneliness at Christmas: “It hit me how alone I was.”

4. Mental Health

All students explained that their mental health issues were exacerbated by their situation and felt it is impossible to quantify the mental health issues some estranged students might be dealing with as a result of their circumstances.

Student C student explained how she wasn’t aware of having mental health issues: “I didn’t know I was depressed.” She found herself isolated and alone which was accentuated by listening to “other students talking to parents”. HE “highlights what you didn’t have” (mainly in terms of financial and emotional support).

They all also agreed that support is not just about financial support.

5. Support from Institutions

- The need for understanding institutional advisors, with having one key advisor identified as being particularly important. It helps to know that “somebody is there”. That there is “advice and support” throughout their HE course, as well as for application and transition into HE and with the SAAS application.
- The need for accommodation throughout the year but also to have the option of moving out of university owned accommodation. “Would be such a help if the university could give access to a van or something to help with moving my things”.
- The need to create or help students find safe private accommodation from safe landlords.
- The need to help find / or be a guarantor.
- Support with deposits and the summer vacation.

