

# The Impact of **Stand Alone's** work with estranged young people in the **higher education sector**

## 2015-2018



*“When I first began my studies, support at university was not visible and felt non-existent.*

*There was no awareness of family estrangement from key support staff who, at one point, asked me what family estrangement was. Support has developed an awful lot over the past 12 months. I now feel less invisible and more valued. I feel staff look at me for answers and want to learn from me, which feels empowering.”*

# Impact Summary

## Policy Change

Estranged young people are now defined as a disadvantaged group of students, and their need for support is recognised by governmental regulators such as The Office for Students and the Scottish Funding Council.



# 4500

estranged students are now studying at universities and colleges that have developed specific policies to support them with accommodation, finance and mental health. **This is roughly 1/2 of all estranged students.**



# 59

English Universities and Colleges have stated **they will be supporting estranged young people in their regulatory access agreements.**



Two major private student accommodation providers have set up corporate foundations to grant estranged students **free or very low cost accommodation to estranged students.**



# 46

46 Vice Chancellors from Universities and Colleges in England, Scotland and Wales have written to Stand Alone to pledge their institutional support for estranged young people. **This is roughly 1/3 of the sector.**



per academic year has been allocated in specific bursaries for estranged young people by the **46 pledging institutions.**



Students at Salford University have started a support group network called PAUSE (People at University Separated or Estranged) **which they are helping us to roll out nationally.**

# The problems that estranged young people face

Estranged young people have no contact with their family, and have either fled or been disowned by their wider family network. Estranged young people come from family backgrounds that are similar to those of care leavers, and many have experienced abuse, neglect, rejection or have been disowned for coming out as LGBT+ or for rejecting honour based practices such as forced marriage.

Very few estranged young people receive statutory support with their family breakdown, and their family troubles are rarely picked up by social services as the mostly occur in their later teenage years, or, increasingly social services may not have the capacity to take them into care. Without this statutory recognition, young people struggle to

communicate their dysfunctional family experiences to external agencies, and have no avenues to address and overcome the disadvantages they face.

Evidence suggests that young people aged 18 – 25, who are estranged from their families or a key family member, have decreased chances of succeeding in higher education. There are around 9,000 estranged young people studying at UK universities, who were dropping out of university at a rate three times higher than the average student. Finance and accommodation struggles are the main drivers to dropping out. This leaves many students working full-time, unable to live on campus, and often homeless over the summer months.

**Our research identified three key barriers to access, retention and success for estranged students:**



Finance



Accommodation



Mental Health

Before starting this project in 2016, higher education providers had low levels of awareness about young people who were estranged from their family. Despite knowledge about care leavers being high, institutions and policy makers did not acknowledge that estranged young people needed support to overcome the barriers they faced and did not recognise them as a priority group for support.

In 2014, only 15 institutions made mention of this group to the fair access regulatory body in England (OFFA). These mentions were not of specific and tailored support. Scottish and Welsh institutions made no

mention to their national bodies (SFC and HEFCW) of supporting estranged students. Only two institutions had developed methods to support estranged young people as they made their way through university.

Although estranged young people were able to qualify for the maximum statutory financial support for higher education as independent students, the stringent requirements by SLC and SAAS made evidencing estrangement in order to qualify not only challenging, but often impossible. breakdown had been dealt with informally and did not involve statutory services.

# Our actions

## The Stand Alone Pledge

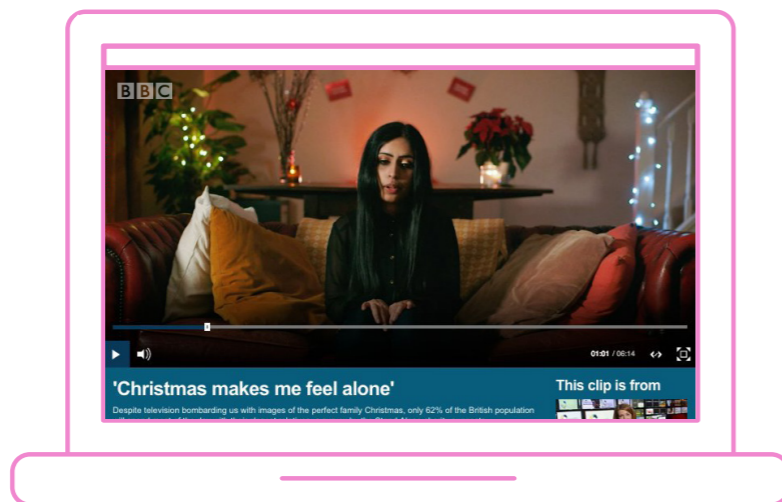
Funding from Esmee Fairbairn Foundation has enabled us to create the Stand Alone Pledge. The Pledge is a commitment by higher education providers, and more specifically their Vice Chancellors, to improve support for estranged students, and level the playing field with other vulnerable groups of students.



The Pledge encourages institutions to audit their current practice and provision and make a very public commitment to supporting estranged young people through the student lifecycle, from application to graduation. The pledge encourages policy development and commitments of support in three key areas of vulnerability for estranged young people – finance, accommodation and mental health.

Vice Chancellors and their executive team must meet a group of estranged young people as part of the pledge. This allows for senior management to fully appreciate the difficulties they face, ensuring that the voice of estranged young people is at the changes that institutions make.

**To date 46 institutions and their Vice Chancellors/Principals have taken the pledge, and have written letters of commitment, including 1/3 of all Russell Group institutions.**



## Policy and Regulatory Bodies

We have worked to ensure that two governmental regulatory bodies in the UK now recognise estranged young people as a disadvantaged group (The Office for Students and the Scottish Funding Council). This has led to obligations for English higher education providers to put more comprehensive support in place, with Scottish policy to follow by the end of 2018.

We have led an awareness-raising and organisational attitude shift in Student Loans Company and DfE policy. We promoted the idea of a specialist team to support individual students to evidence their independent status based on their family estrangement, reducing this barrier to access to higher education significantly, as well as reducing risks to mental and emotional health. This recommendation was accepted and implemented in May 2016.

We have worked with UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admission Services) to develop a question on their application form to help estranged young people disclose their difficulties to their institutions pre-entry. This will enable universities to reach out and smooth the transition process into university accommodation, as well as consider contextual offers. In partnership, we have developed information specifically for applicants who are estranged and education professionals who have dealt with them: UCAS

We are working with the new Office for Students to bring about a reliable way of measuring access and retention rates, in collaboration with Student Loans Company. Importantly, we are looking to work in partnership to more comprehensively research the impact of interventions for estranged young people.



## Student Voice

We have placed estranged young people at the centre of our work, and have engaged hundreds of estranged students throughout the project, who have acted as advocates and have shared their experiences of living life and studying without a family network. Our students have taken part in a range of activities, from appearing in documentaries and the national media to speaking at conferences and meeting with senior management at their universities. Many have driven their own student union campaigns and some have been successful in creating support groups for estranged students to share their experiences. Their stories and bravery has helped Stand Alone to raise the awareness needed to create change for this group.

**We have started an ambitious policy strategy to help estranged young people to engage with members of the house, and their local MPs.**



# The Impact of our work

Despite the introduction of fees and the abolition of student maintenance grants, Student Loans Company data shows that applications to university from estranged students have only seen a very negligible drop.

We have received pledge letters from the Vice-Chancellors of 46 institutions. That is roughly 1/3 of higher education providers in the UK. 59 institutions in England now include estranged young people in their OFFA (now OfS) regulatory agreements, with mention of specific and tailored support for this group. This is a 400% increase since the start of this project.

# 4500

estranged young people are now covered by better support in their higher education institution. These students have access to better financial support, accommodation policies, and wellbeing strategies.



“This support is so beneficial for students like myself, who have grown up not fitting into categories or requirements. It allows me to get the support I need during a stressful and busy time as a student. University of Sunderland have a great support network that are regularly contacting us, keeping in touch and showing that they really do care”

(University of Sunderland)

# Financial:

The Institutions that have pledged have committed the equivalent of £2.8 million per year in specific bursaries and other financial support initiatives for estranged students. Feedback suggests this has helped students to reduce the hours they need to work to meet their living costs, and has reduced the high levels of stress that had been attributed to findings sums of money for course and living costs, and has facilitated greater academic focus.

Estranged students now have a dedicated team at Student Loans Company to help them to prove their family estrangement for the purposes of accessing statutory finance, which has made the process simpler, reduced risks to students' mental health and wellbeing, and reduced the length of time that students wait for finance. Between April 2016, when the Estrangement Assessors were introduced at SLC, and April 2018 a total of 587 estranged students were referred to the specialist team for assistance with proving their family estrangement. 80% were subsequently awarded independent status and received the full 9K annual statutory loan. These students would have otherwise not been able to prove their estrangement and access finance. Further changes in SLC procedures means that estranged students don't need to prove their family estrangement each and every year, impacting all 9,300 estranged students in the UK.

“Being estranged from both of my parents I really struggle financially. I was unsure how I was going to cope over the holidays and this grant is really a life saver and I am really appreciative that it has been created”

(Student at Manchester Met)

“Without this support I would not have been able to attend almost a month worth of lectures. I would have been behind on my essential bills and very stressed”

(Student)



## Mental Health:

- The University of Salford has set up the first successful and sustainable peer to peer support group for estranged students, called PAUSE. It aims to break down isolation and improve mental health & confidence. PAUSE has become a model that we are expecting to grow and scale across the HE sector.
- 8 universities have given estranged students priority access to counselling. The cap on the number of counselling sessions for estranged students has been removed at 9 universities, on a case-by-case basis.

“ My mental health has improved, I have more friends that I now lean on in times of need, I feel valued and heard and no longer as invisible at university ”

“ PAUSE has helped me a lot though my first few months of university, talking to other people that understand your situation and can offer useful advice about dealing with these situations while at university is an incredible help. Such an amazing group of people! ”

“ It’s nice to know I’m not the only one estranged. After hearing other individuals stories I began to think if they can do it so can I, therefore it’s encouraging. ”

“ I am more engaged in my degree. More passionate and dedicated to achieving the best I am capable of. ”



## Accommodation:

- 77% of pledged institutions have made available accommodation for 365 days a year for estranged students. This means that over 1800 estranged students now have the option of staying in university accommodation over the summer and other vacation periods, avoiding homelessness.
- In addition, to help with securing accommodation for the year, 23 institutions have removed the hurdle of deposits and/or guarantors.
- 18 higher education providers offer summertime bursaries or access to other institutional funds for the summer vacation. For example, Manchester Metropolitan University paid out 93 summer bursaries of £1000 in 2016 and a similar number in 2017.
- Two major private accommodation providers (Unite Students and Campus Living Villages) have started corporate foundations that specifically support estranged students and grant completely free and very low cost living accommodation. To date, they have gifted the equivalent value of £1.7 million to 180 estranged students over the last three years.
- To support new students at the start of their course Sheffield Hallam University piloted a unique 'Estranged Students Transition Fund' which allowed estranged young people to move into halls of residence early and before the start of their course. The success of the pilot has meant the scheme will be embedded into institutional policy. Stand Alone has promoted this as best practice.

“ I no longer have the stress of having to worry about where I'll be living at any given time, and having year-round accommodation gives me the space to become a better student and discover myself as an individual ”

(Student at Manchester Metropolitan University)

“ It's hard as an estranged student to feel like you're capable of achieving a degree with a very limited support system. Schemes like this made the transition easier and made me appear less like an outsider and more like a regular student ”

(Student at Sheffield Hallam)



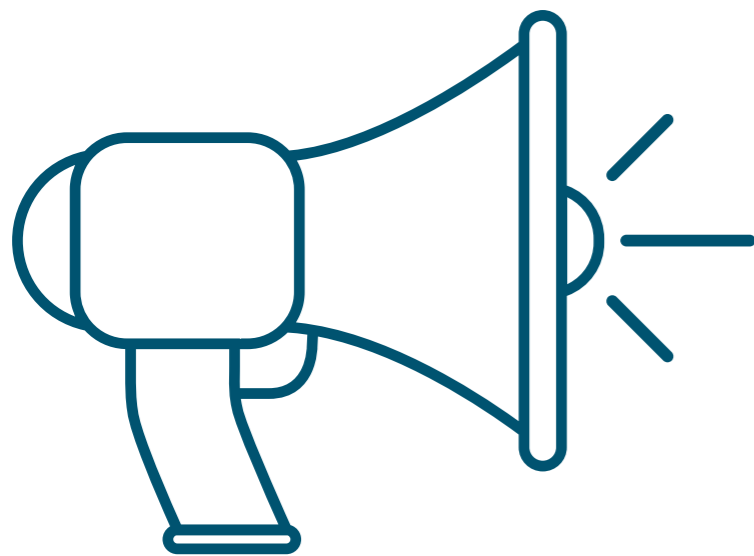
## Student Voice:

- More than 50 students have met their VC or Pro VC across ten institutions, raising awareness and bringing about policy change and fundamental shifts in awareness around the reliance of family in university policy.
  - We ran the first ever 'Estranged Student Solidarity Campaign Week' in November 2017. 33 Student Unions engaged with activities, events and on social media and on campus.
  - 32 students have contributed to staff training at our professional development conferences to talk directly about their experiences of being estranged from their family, and the barriers they faced at their institutions.
- We have placed four students in the national media in December 2017, speaking as part of a film on the BBC's Victoria Derbyshire show about the isolation of being estranged from family, and staying in university halls of residence alone. This reached audiences of over 2 million views. Earlier in 2017, one student spoke as part of our feature on BBC Radio 4's Woman's Hour about her experience as a young south Asian student studying without the support or approval of a family network.

“  
The university really listens to us and put things in place for us.  
”

“  
I contacted the uni and am working with them and the union to campaign for better provisions for estranged students, as well as having an independent students officer. It's still very early days, but I'm hopeful  
”

(Student)



## What's ahead?

We understand that supporting estranged young people through their time at university will only get them so far, and eventually the support will subside. The transition from graduation into the working world can be intimidating when you do not have family capital to fall back on.

As well as further cementing our work in the HE sector, we wish to further research and understand the journeys of estranged young people out of higher education and their subsequent experiences of capitalising on their degree.

Our research to date, and our anecdotal work with young people, suggests that estranged young people may be homeless again after graduation, and will struggle to meet the practical aspects of relocation, or to find work and employment without a stable sense of home.

“  
I am worried for my future once I graduate next year and how I'm going to survive if I don't get a graduate job straight away, because again, I do not have support tfrom family.  
”

(Keele University, third-year student)