

This report is based on the research conducted by Prof. Yvette Taylor, University of Strathclyde and Dr. Cristina Costa, University of West of England, funded by the Carnegie Trust and the Society for Research in Higher Education.

# Estranged Students in Higher and Further Education

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Estrangement feels very taboo... it's almost like having to out myself a lot of the time to people... people are more familiar with the idea that your parents are divorced or have died or whatever (interviewee: Jennifer, 31)

It's like a rope round you pulling you back as you're going forward, but I don't think it's a barrier that stops, I think it's a barrier that's just there and to be aware of. (Robert, 29)

**Estranged students** can be defined as a group of young adults who have unstable, minimal or no contact with their parents and/or their wider family networks. In the context of the Scotland, estrangement status among students was only recognized in 2016 through campaigning initiatives supported by Stand Alone and ButtleUK. To date, only seven Scottish Universities and Colleges have explicit policies in place to support this group as signatories to the **Stand Alone Pledge**.<sup>1</sup>

Little is known about the experiences of estranged students either in the UK or internationally: based on **interviews (n=23)**, this study represents the first of its kind in Scotland, exploring how estranged students navigate Education structures and the institutional and interpersonal resources available. It offers an examination of **estranged students' further and higher education experiences, identities and expectations**, how these are **supported and managed** and what educational and employment aspirations are fostered and developed. While it is clear that steps have been made in helping education institutions identify and support estranged students, often **estranged students do not fit pre-existing widening participation policies or funding categories** (e.g. Bland 2018; UCAS 2017); **discretion, care and flexibility** are needed.

Students become **estranged from their families for a number of reasons**, including emotional and physical abuse, clash of values and mismatched expectations around family roles. In addition, estrangement can also relate to 'divorce, honour-based violence, forced marriage, and family rejection of LGBTQI+ students' (Blake, 2015).

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<sup>1</sup> see <http://www.thestandalonepledge.org.uk/champion-institutions>

## Research Findings

- **Definitions of estrangement are restrictive and inflexible**, offering little understanding or appreciation of the complexity of estrangement experiences and practices and hardships: the Office for Students limits the status of estrangement in higher education to students between 18 and 24 years old and stipulates that estrangement means no communicative relationship with either living biological parent (2018), a definition also shared by the Student Loans Company (2016). It can be **very difficult to 'prove' the status of estrangement** under such restrictive conditions.
- Definitions of estrangement shape the identities and realities of those who are formally associated with it and who can become, or fear becoming, **victims of scrutinisation and unfair surveillance** strategies, justified in the name of anti-fraud detection. Often monitoring approaches do not take into account the specificities, vulnerabilities or characteristics of estranged students (Bland 2018).
- **Estrangement does not cease or becomes irrelevant when a student reaches the age of 25**. Even when young people leave the family home it 'continues to be the site through which many of their individual biographies and expectations are routed' beyond the tidy age of 25 (Valentine et al. 2003: 481). This signals the complexity in defining 'youth' and the significance of this (expanding) point in the life-course of an individual, especially when they may lack the social and economic support that they are assumed to receive via family.
- Although well intentioned, **supporting structures only cater partially for the needs of estranged students** who are often considered from the perspective and experience of traditional students, with 'add-on' support recognising additional financial hardships. The intersection of financial, social *and* emotional needs still has to be taken into account.
- There are enduring similarities in the experiences of estranged students, with many reporting e.g. **experiences of homelessness, severe financial hardship, mental health issues, disrupted study**, etc. Experiences of estrangement can lead a **strong sense of difference and exclusion** within further and higher education contexts. As Colleges and Universities claim readiness to welcome a diverse student body, there is a need to acknowledge the complexity of students' lives, encompassing an approach inclusive of those do not fit within a regular or expected pattern of what it means to be a student.
- While there are group commonalities, little is known about the **differences in estranged students' experiences, in terms of e.g. race, class, gender and**

- sexuality**, a knowledge gap that requires research attention. Students' struggles need to be accounted for **intersectionally** rather than through a tick box exercise of widening participation/diversity agendas to which institutions sign up. The **Stand Alone Pledge has to be agreed, actively implemented and monitored**.
- **Inclusion of estranged students in academia does not stop at entry point**; to measure entry as success would be to ignore the challenges students bring and carry with them throughout their studies, and indeed beyond. **Positioning students as 'non-traditional' can encourage a deficit perspective** (and labelling students as 'disadvantaged' may strengthen stereotypes rather than contest them). This **'othering' of students** from non-traditional backgrounds may well foster a sense of difference, with institutional variations in student integration.
  - It is important to **consider students' own definitions, as well as resistances and personal strength** evident in all interviews. Often students face isolation, uncertainty, financial instability and experience or fear of homelessness, and yet have still secured a place at College or University using whatever limited resources, personal and practical, to **navigate barriers to their academic success**.
  - Family estrangement is often regarded as a form of deviance and interference in relation to both unquestioned assumptions and the cultural imagination that 'a family is forever' (Sharp 2017). This is problematic in that such approach casts estrangement as an anomaly that requires fixing, where **family estrangement is becoming a more prevalent reality in modern society** (Conti 2015).

## Example Quotes

It [estrangement] seems negative that you're either cut off or cut yourself off from your family, and normally that comes with the attachment of 'what have they done wrong for that to happen?' (interviewee: Robert, 29)

[estrangement comes with] a degree of further responsibility and further pressures that not everybody has to experience. (interviewee: Dylan, 28)

So I think financially it is a big difference [from peers who are not estranged]. As well as like focusing on my studies I need to focus on an income. (interviewee: Ingrid, 22)

Maybe they [student who are not estranged] can have worries about other things, but they will never lack food, they will never have to worry about rent or stuff like this. (interviewee: Martin, 22)

## References

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*Dear Student,  
you are not alone. Estrangement  
is more common than you think*

Image: Postcard produced by research participant (see Taylor, 2018).

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