Support for estranged students in UK Higher Education: An analysis of the Stand Alone Pledge

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Abstract

Estranged students are less likely to achieve a first or 2:1 than their non-estranged peers and are more likely to drop out of university (UCAS, 2023a). As an under-represented group of students, experiencing multiple disadvantages, they have specific support needs. The Stand Alone Pledge, devised in 2016, was designed to improve estranged students' access, participation, and success in Higher Education by encouraging the development of institutional support in the form of a Pledge letter. This article details the findings of an assessment of the Pledge undertaken by Spacey and Sanderson[1] at the University of Lincoln (Ethics Reference: UoL2022_10126). This was the first study of its kind to evaluate the impact of the Pledge across the UK. The authors reviewed all 112 SA Pledge letters in conjunction with the information provided on each institution's profile page on the SA website. This assessment found that Pledge commitment had grown from 0 to 112 institutions since its introduction with almost half (44 per cent) of Higher Education Providers (HEPs) in England endorsing the Pledge, with half in Wales (50 per cent) and over three quarters in Scotland (83 per cent). None of the HEPs in Northern Ireland had signed up to the Pledge. Most institutions outline their support for estranged students in the context of their commitment to widening participation whilst just under half aligned support with their existing provision for care experienced students. Support for estranged students in the UK now includes a comprehensive range of support measures in relation to finance, accommodation, mental health and wellbeing, and outreach and transition. Recommendations are also provided to enhance and improve support for estranged students.

Keywords

Estranged students, estrangement, family support, student support, Higher Education

Introduction

Since 2016, the charity, Stand Alone, has embarked on its UK-wide HE projects which includes the Stand Alone Pledge for Higher Education Providers (HEPs) to develop institutional support for estranged students. They have also worked to raise awareness of the barriers to HE for students estranged from parents/family and embed recognition for estranged students at every stage of their student journey by national governments and across HE sector bodies (Stand Alone, 2021). Indeed, estranged students are considered by the Office for Students, the independent regulator of HE in England, to be a group of students who are more likely to experience risks to equality of opportunity (OfS, 2023a) and are one of the student groups that may be targeted by Access and Participation Plan intervention strategies (OfS, 2023b).

In July 2022, Dr. Rachel Spacey and Rebecca Sanderson at the University of Lincoln (UoL) submitted an Expression of Interest to the charity, Stand Alone (SA) to evaluate the Stand Alone Pledge and were successfully awarded the tender. SA required an independent evaluation of their HE scheme which sought to understand the change in support since its establishment and Pledge distribution across the UK which could be shared with their funders and other stakeholders to demonstrate impact (Stand Alone, 2022). This was the first study of its kind to evaluate the impact of the SA Pledge across all the regions of the UK.

This paper provides reflections on the findings of the project, analysing the SA Pledge letters and the change in support, completed in November 2022 (Ethics Reference: UoL2022_10126). It further considers the gaps in support and provides several recommendations for HE staff with an interest in supporting the experiences of students who are estranged from family.

Review of literature

Estrangement is the "*condition of being physically and or emotionally distanced from one or more family members, either by choice or at the request or decision of the other*" (Agllias, 2017, 4). In the UK, a study from 2014 conducted by IpsosMORI found that eight per cent of respondents over the age of fifteen were physically estranged from at least one member of their family suggesting estrangement was not as "*atypical or rare*" as first believed (ibid., 8). Whilst it is likely that there have always been students at university who are distanced from family in some way and subsequently may not be in receipt of their support, estrangement was introduced as a criterion into the means test for student support in 1997. In 2008, estranged students were the focus of a report from the National Union of Students (NUS) - *Evaluating Estrangement,* which highlighted the difficulties that students who were no longer in contact with their family experienced when applying for a maintenance grant

from their local authority (prior to the establishment of the Student Loans Company). The burdensome nature of locating and establishing proof of estrangement to merit independent status and receive the full grant was often difficult and traumatic since it involved obtaining proof from the very parent(s) from which the student was estranged (Stand Alone, 2013). This early NUS research into the impact of estrangement on students was motivated by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBT) students who had shared their experiences in NUS networks since it was often LGBT students who became estranged from family once they came out at university (NUS, 2008). Indeed, recent research in 2023 indicates that almost half (46 per cent) of LGBT+ young adults are estranged from at least one member of their family (Just Like Us, 2023).

Estranged students are defined as young people, aged between 18 and 24, studying at university without the support and approval of a family network (Stand Alone, 2016a). Research suggests that most estranged students remove themselves from a family situation without professional intervention (Bland, 2016), and they become estranged because of abuse, clash of values and mismatched expectations around family roles. It may also result from divorce, forced marriage and family rejection (OFFA, 2017). Students, specifically, young people between 18 and 24 whilst adults in the legal sense are automatically viewed as dependent on family for the purposes of accessing statutory finance from the relevant student finance body (Bland, 2018). They are often considered alongside care experienced students and care leavers in HE, since while they often leave their families without intervention, a minority of them may also have experienced periods of being in care before they turned 16 (UCAS, 2023a). Indeed, all three groups come under the wider umbrella heading of "*students without family support*" (OfS, 2020c, np). However, it is only care leavers for whom local authorities in England, for example, have a statutory responsibility. In the absence of this safety net, estranged students are potentially more vulnerable than those students who can qualify as a statutory care leaver (Stand Alone, 2016a).

The Office for Students (OfS) therefore, consider estranged students as a group "*that experience disadvantage*" with "*particular equality gaps and support needs*" (OfS, 2020a, np). HE providers are encouraged to think about the types of support they provide in relation to estranged students' access, participation, and success in HE in their Access and Participation Plans (APPs). In the recently published *Equality of Opportunity Risk Register* (EORR) from the OfS, twelve sector-wide risks that may affect a student's opportunity to access and succeed in HE is presented for providers to consider in relation to a number of student characteristics of which estrangement is one. The OfS suggests that there are four risks to estranged students which providers should consider when formulating their APPs: insufficient academic support, insufficient personal support, cost pressures and capacity issues such as access to accommodation (OfS, 2023c). Within the devolved Governments of the four nations of the UK, estranged students are also considered within the Scottish Framework for Fair Access as a group experiencing hardship (SCAPP, 2023). Moreover, in 2021, the Scottish Government committed to "*improve the support available to estranged students – those without parental financial support – with a*

package of support equivalent to the Living Wage" (SNP, 2021, 65). In Wales, estranged students were not included in the *Reaching Wider* programme funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), the region's widening access initiative nor as an under-represented group in Fee and Access Plans (HEFCW, 2022) although care experienced learners are. Whilst there is no comparable framework in Northern Ireland, estranged students' information is available on the Student Finance NI webpages, and they are eligible to receive full support. However, it must be noted that in Northern Ireland, tuition fees are about half the amount of the rest of the UK whilst maintenance loans are larger.

The term 'estranged student' began to be used more widely in UK HE in the last decade with the establishment of the charity Stand Alone in 2013. Its origins were inspired by the work of the NUS in 2008 and the firsthand experiences of its founder, Becca Bland. Stand Alone advocates on behalf of, and supports, estranged adults including students by communicating openly about estrangement, facilitating support groups and training, and commissioning research. They suggest that the biggest barriers estranged students face are a lack of understanding about estrangement coupled with disapproving judgement: "*Stand Alone has found that societal knowledge and awareness regarding family estrangement and disownment is currently low but, conversely, stigma is high*" (Bland and Shaw, 2015, 24). Since 2014, Stand Alone have commissioned and/or undertaken research to better understand the shared (and sometimes differing) experiences of care leavers and estranged students (Bland and Shaw, 2015), family support (Bland and Stevenson, 2018) and employment and postgraduate study (Rouncefield-Swales and Bland, 2019) amongst others. This has been complimented by several academic research studies focusing on estranged students' experiences (see, for example, Blake et al., 2015; Costa et al., 2020; Spacey, 2020; Stevenson et al., 2020; Spacey and Sanderson, 2021; Marvell and Child, 2023) adding to what is known about the outcomes and experiences of estranged students and highlighting that in the absence of familial support, the stresses, and strains of HE are exacerbated for estranged students as they process and recover from "*hurtful and damaging family relationships*" (Spacey and Sanderson, 2021, 37).

The Stand Alone Pledge was thus devised by the charity in 2016 to garner publicly declared commitments from institutions providing HE in support of their estranged students. The Pledge, which is free, is a promise or undertaking and encourages HEIs, including non-university providers of HE courses, to develop targeted support for estranged students and to communicate that support via the Stand Alone web pages and their own corporate websites. There are a number of pledges or promises to which HEPs can commit many of which focus on specific groups of under-represented students including the Armed Forces Covenant (2011) and many of which appeared following the introduction of the Stand Alone Pledge, for example, the Social Mobility Pledge (2018), the Care Leaver Covenant (2018), the Fair Chance Pledge (2019) (for students with a criminal record) and the GTRSB (Gypsies, Travellers, Roma, Showmen and Boater) into Higher Education Pledge (2021). Whilst there is little academic research exploring the impact of voluntary pledges in

HE, experimental research suggests that pledges may "*help groups to coordinate on collectively optimal behavior and facilitate cooperation*" (Koessler, 2022, 1) which would seem to be pertinent in relation to the development of support within and across an institution for estranged students.

Research Design

Stand Alone suggests that Pledge letters are written by a VC, or their deputy, setting out how they currently support estranged students and the areas of support they wish to develop in the future. SA provides examples of best practice in four key areas which institutions can consider when developing their support for estranged students. Institutions committing to the SA Pledge do not need to have support in all four areas but are encouraged "*as a minimum, to identify one commitment in two pledge areas*" (Stand Alone, 2016b, 3). The four areas of best practice are finance, accommodation, mental health and wellbeing and outreach and transition. Examination of the numbers of institutions pledging support for estranged students has been undertaken annually by SA with institutions who have made the Pledge completing an annual online monitoring form.

This article details the results of content analysis of the SA Pledge letters supported by the information institutions provided to SA for the Pledge website to understand what has been accomplished since 2016. In addition, any gaps and future development opportunities for SA identified during the investigation were presented to the charity, some of which are considered here. The quantitative research approach known as content analysis is "*the analysis of documents and texts that seeks to quantify content in terms of predetermined categories and in a systematic and replicable manner*" (Bryman, 2016, 285). This method was utilised as it provided the best fit in terms of researcher resource available to meet SA's requirements which included identifying the distribution of commitments across the UK nations (Stand Alone, 2022). Spacey and Sanderson reviewed all the SA Pledge letters as of November 2022 (n=112)[2] in conjunction with the information provided on each institution's profile page on the SA website (n=112) which was then mapped to the four areas of Pledge best practice and key indicators agreed with SA. The data was analysed using both MS Excel and IBM SPSS Software platforms. Whilst several different units of analysis could be counted in content analysis, for the purposes of this project, the "*phenomena of interest*" were the four areas of Pledge best practice (Bryman, 2016, 292). The findings were supplemented by reference to publicly available datasets from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) where relevant to provide additional context.

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[2] Since this research was undertaken a further HEP has signed the Pledge taking the total number of institutions to 113.

Results

Pledge progress and geographical coverage

Of the 112 SA Pledges, 94 were from universities (83.9 percent) whilst pledges from colleges (including Further Education (FE) and colleges providing both FE and HE) totalled 18 (16.1 per cent). Of the 18 colleges, seven Pledge commitments were made by FE only colleges. Analysis of Higher Education Providers (HEPs), which includes universities and some FE colleges providing HE, indicates that Pledge commitment has grown steadily since the introduction of the Pledge in 2016 from 13 to 105 in 2022 with a notable increase of 48 to 75 commitments between 2018 and 2019.

Comparison of the numbers of HEPs who have signed the Pledge with the number of registered HEPs (HESA, 2022) suggests that almost half of HEPs in England have endorsed the Pledge. Scotland has almost full coverage with over three quarters of institutions committed to the Pledge and half of all HEPs in Wales have signed up. None of the HEPs in Northern Ireland have signed the Pledge.

UK nations	No. of HEPs (excludes distance learning and student numbers <100) based on HESA 2020-21 data	No. signing the Pledge	% of total
England	186	81	43.5
Scotland	18	15	83.3
Wales	10	5	50.0
Northern Ireland	4	0	0.0
TOTAL	**218**	**105**	**48.2**

Table 1: Pledge signatories amongst HEPs in the UK

Types of HEIs making the Pledge and strategic alignment

Consideration of the universities who have signed the Pledge in terms of university mission group (collections of universities with a shared focus or ambition) (n=43), reveals that the largest number of SA Pledge signatories sit within the Russell Group (n=19) - 79.2 percent of their members have signed the Pledge. The Russell Group is a self-selecting group of British research universities. Similarly, over half of both the

MillionPlus (modern universities) and the University Alliance (professional and technical universities) groups have signed the Pledge (68.2 and 60.0 per cent respectively). Both the MillionPlus and the University Alliance "*actively emphasise a widening participation component*" or commitment to increase the proportion of people entering HE from under-represented groups, in their mission statements (Hubbard et al., 2021, 295). It must be noted, however, that many Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) do not belong to a mission group.

University mission group	No. of Pledge signatories	No. of mission group members	% of group
MillionPlus	15	22	68.2
Russell Group	19	24	79.2
University Alliance	9	15	60.0

Table 2: Pledge signatories according to university mission group

Indeed, most institutions (n=78; 69.6 percent) set out their support for estranged students in the context of their commitment to widening participation - this might be in relation to their Access Agreement (up to 2019) or Access and Participation Plan (from 2019), Fair Access or Widening Access policies and commitments in Scotland, existing widening participation activity or service or more widely as a social justice imperative to support under-represented groups of students to access and succeed in HE or FE. Just under half of the institutions aligned their support for estranged students to what they already provided to care experienced students or care leavers at their institution (n=51, 45.5 per cent).

Student lifecycle stages and support available to estranged students

Institutions pledged at least one aspect of support for estranged students during the following student lifecycle stages: access, transition, success, and progression, revealing that support is overwhelmingly focused on the success (staying and doing well at university or college) stage with 97.3 percent of Pledge signatories pledging support (n=109). Access (getting into university or college) (n=98) was also well provided for with 87.5 percent of Pledge signatories detailing support during this stage of estranged students' journeys. The transition stage, which we understood to mean from pre–entry through arrival, induction and the first year experience (Gale and Parker, 2014) was a focus of almost half the Pledge commitments (n=55) whilst progression or post-graduation (beyond university or college) was a focus of a quarter of Pledge signatories (n=28).

	Student Lifecycle Stage			
	Access	Transition	Success	Progression
No. of Pledge signatories	98	55	109	28
% of Pledge signatories	87.5	49.1	97.3	25.0

Table 3: Pledges of support across student lifecycle stages

Four areas of Pledge best practice

Finance

In relation to the four areas of best practice suggested by SA for inclusion in the Pledge – finance, accommodation, mental health and wellbeing, and outreach and transition, analysis of the Pledge letters and commitments revealed that at least one aspect of financial support for estranged students was promised by 107 (95.5 per cent) institutions. The table below reveals the types of financial support provided to estranged students. Please note that because some institutions pledged more than one type of support, the totals exceed the number of Pledges signed (n=112).

The three most popular types of financial support pledged by HE providers were priority for estranged students to access universal student hardship funds at an institution (69.6 percent), information, advice, and guidance (IAG) about financial support (66.1 per cent) and a dedicated bursary, grant, or fund for estranged students (58.0 per cent). Less frequently pledged financial support offers included financial contributions to estranged students' summer vacation accommodation and/or living costs pledged by 16 HE providers (14.3 per cent), a contribution towards or waiving of graduation costs such as free gown hire or ceremony ticket (n=9) and financial support for estranged students as they moved out of HE - this might take the form of a deposit for their post-university accommodation (n=8). Four HE providers also pledged financial support for estranged students' travel costs during their studies (3.8 per cent).

Financial Support	No. of Pledge signatories	% of Pledge signatories
Access/priority to universal hardship funds/bursaries or funds	78	69.6
Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)	74	66.1
Dedicated estranged students' bursary/grant/fund	65	58.0
Summer vacation - accommodation or living expenses	16	14.3
Graduation costs - gown, ceremony, or contribution towards it	9	8.0
Moving on costs - deposit, accommodation, or maintenance	8	7.1
Travel costs	4	3.8

Table 4: Range of financial support pledged for estranged students

Accommodation

Support for estranged students' accommodation needs was pledged by 105 HEPs (93.8 per cent). The most popular accommodation support pledged by over two thirds of signatories was in relation to the availability of university accommodation for estranged students (n=79), stating that accommodation would be available to estranged students - ranging from the most comprehensive package of 365 days a year, 52 weeks for at least the first year or the entire duration of the students' studies (70.5 per cent). A quarter of HE providers pledged financial support towards a deposit, rent or even a deposit waiver for estranged students (n=31), provided IAG about accommodation options (n=30) or had a guarantor scheme for either their own accommodation and/or private accommodation (n=28). Less frequently pledged were working with Unite Students, a UK student accommodation provider, to offer accommodation for estranged students (n=12) or providing a welcome pack when estranged students first moved into their accommodation (n=6) with groceries or kitchen equipment, for example.

Accommodation Support	No of Pledge signatories	% of Pledge signatories
Available 365 days a year/52 weeks/all first year/duration of course	79	70.5
Financial support towards deposit, rent or deposit waiver	31	27.7
Information, Advice and Guidance (IAG)	30	26.8
Guarantor scheme for university accommodation/private accommodation	28	25.0
Work with/partnership with UNITE funding accommodation/UNITE bursary	12	10.7
Welcome pack - equipment, groceries	6	5.4

Table 5: Range of accommodation support pledged for estranged students

Mental Health

A commitment to support the wellbeing and mental health of estranged students was pledged by 103 institutions (92.0 per cent) with the most frequently cited support being access to universally available counselling and/or wellbeing and/or support services (n=90). Around two fifths of HE providers pledged that estranged students had (or would have) access to an allocated point of contact for their wellbeing and/or mental health or they would have priority access to universal services (n=45). General peer support in the form of groups and opportunities to meet other estranged students was offered by 27 Pledge signatories whilst dedicated mental health support groups and opportunities for estranged students were promised by 18 HEPs. Fifteen institutions also provided a welcome pack with wellbeing resources or a dedicated portal or resources to support wellbeing.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Support	No of Pledge signatories	% of Pledge signatories
Access to universal counselling/support/wellbeing services	90	92.0
Access to allocated point of contact/support package/priority	45	40.2
Peer support – groups/opportunities for meeting other ES or care (not MH)	27	24.1
Mental health peer support group for estranged students	18	16.1
Wellbeing welcome pack/online portal/resources	15	13.4

Table 6: *Range of wellbeing and mental health support pledged for estranged students*

Outreach

Outreach and transition best practice for estranged students were promised by 97 (86.6 percent) institutions. Outreach is understood to be a widening participation activity which takes place pre-entry to university to help under-represented students view HE as an option for their future (TASO, nd). That included over half (n=66) promising to provide IAG about the support available at their institution for estranged students (59.0 per cent) whilst almost half (n=51) had a named advisor or point of contact from pre-application through to transition that estranged students could contact (45.5 per cent). Forty-eight HEPs targeted estranged students in their outreach activities such as providing dedicated programmes, events, or summer schools to which estranged students were invited to attend whilst some promised mentoring, tours, or transition events. Financial IAG specifically in relation to outreach and transition was pledged by 31 HEPs (27.7 percent). Sixteen HEPs offered contextualised admissions such as a lower conditional offer for estranged students or that attendance on their outreach programme would lead to a lower conditional offer (14.3 per cent).

Outreach and transition	*No of Pledge signatories*	*% of Pledge signatories*
General IAG about university support	66	59.0
Named advisor/point of contact	51	45.5
Targeting in WP programmes/summer schools/open days/ mentoring/ tours/ transition events	48	42.9
Financial IAG	31	27.7
Offer contextualised admissions/outreach programme attendance can lead to lower conditional offer	16	14.3

Table 7: *Range of outreach and transition support pledged for estranged students*

Additional support measures

Dedicated member of staff

In addition to the four areas of best practice prompted by Stand Alone, a range of support was pledged for estranged students within the Pledge letters and the institutional SA webpage (Table 8). Almost two-thirds of signatories (n=72, 64.3 per cent) had a dedicated member of staff and/or team at their institution that estranged students could contact, of which 25 were named on Pledge letters. In terms of responsibility for the SA Pledge commitment itself, almost a quarter of institutions (n=27) had a member of staff or team with oversight and/or responsibility for their Pledge (24.1 per cent).

Information, advice, and guidance

Fifty (44.6 per cent) institutions referred to either a dedicated webpage for estranged students which was online or in development and/or information on their website for estranged students whilst 41 (36.6 per cent) institutions stated that they were providing either academic support, awareness raising, information or training for personal tutors and/or other academic staff and/or professional services staff so that staff were more aware of the issues affecting estranged students and were conversant with the ways in which their institution was supporting them should they need to support estranged students or signpost them to other institutional support in some way.

Working in collaboration

Twenty-eight (25.0 per cent) institutions were working or planned to work with their respective Students' Union, Guild or Association to provide a co-ordinated approach to supporting estranged students at their institution. Twenty-five (22.3 percent) institutions were working with third sector organisations and/or community organisations to better support estranged students' pre-entry and beyond university - this was in addition to existing institutional outreach activity with schools and colleges.

Support for progression

In terms of preparing estranged students for life beyond the university or the progression stage of the student lifecycle, seven (6.3 per cent) institutions provided work experience or internship opportunities specifically targeted at estranged students whilst five (4.5 per cent) referred to either discounted tuition fees or institutional financial support for postgraduate study.

Additional support for estranged students	*No of Pledge signatories*	*% of Pledge signatories*
Dedicated member of staff/team for ES to contact	72	64.3
Online information or dedicated webpage(s)	50	44.6
Information, training, and awareness raising for staff	41	36.6
Working with Students' Union, Guild or Association	28	25.0
Dedicated member of staff/team responsible for Pledge	27	24.1
Working with third sector organisations	25	22.3
Dedicated careers and employability support	7	6.3
Discounted postgraduate tuition fees/financial support	5	4.5

Table 8: Additional support measures pledged for estranged students

Discussion

Analysis of the SA Pledge commitments has revealed that since the initiative was introduced by the charity in 2016, support for estranged students in the UK has grown, year on year from 0 in 2016 to 112 Pledge commitments in 2022 of which 94 are from universities whilst Pledges from Colleges (including FE and Colleges providing both FE and HE) total 18. Amongst HEPs, which include universities and some FE colleges providing HE, there are currently 105 signatories to the SA Pledge. This represents almost half of HEPs in England, half in Wales and over three quarters in Scotland in terms of coverage. Support for estranged students is primarily aligned with institutional commitments to widening participation and strategic commitments to welcome under-represented groups of students into HE. As part of their conditions of registration with the OfS in England, for example, HEPs have had to demonstrate that they have an Access and Participation Plan which they comply with and that students registered on a HE course receive a high quality academic experience (OfS, 2022). In addition, providing parity of support for all students studying without family support is important to those universities and colleges who already had a good package of support for care experienced students.

Support for estranged students in the UK now includes a range of financial support measures (95.5 percent of SA Pledge signatories), accommodation support (93.8 per cent), support for mental health and wellbeing (92.0 per cent) and outreach and transition (86.6 percent). Much of that support sits within the 'success' phase of the student lifecycle which is important when the limited sector data that is available in relation to estranged students highlights that the continuation rate was 8.2 percent lower than students who were not estranged in 2017-18 whilst the attainment rate of estranged students in 2018-19 was 13.0 per cent lower than students who were not estranged (OfS, 2020). Since the Pledge is neither a quality nor a charter mark, the range of support pledged to estranged students in the Pledge letters is remarkable. It must also be noted that the range of support available to estranged students at Pledge institutions may in fact be much greater than this analysis suggests, since the Pledge letters are not formulaic, and some institutions may not have included every single support measure they provide.

The Pledge has helped raise awareness of estranged students and the unique challenges university students without family support encounter, across both the HE and FE sectors. Indeed, 41 institutions (36.6 per cent) stated that they were providing or were working towards providing information and/or training for academic and/or professional staff so that their organisations were more aware of the issues affecting estranged students and the ways in which they could support them.

This analysis has a number of limitations. The data analysed was confined to the commitments listed in the Pledge letters and associated institutional page on the Stand Alone website. The level of detail provided within the Pledge letters varied, and some providers stated an intention to develop further initiatives for estranged students. However, follow up or investigation of the support listed for estranged

students on institutions' websites was outside of the scope of this study. It should also be noted that there may be other HE institutions who currently support estranged students but have not yet signed the Pledge. For example, a cursory search of the internet reveals that HEPs in Northern Ireland do refer to estranged students and some signpost to Stand Alone, even though they have not signed the Pledge. A full examination of this also lies outside the scope of this analysis, but it may be useful to consider further research to better understand the extent and nature of provision made by HE institutions beyond that recorded in the Pledge commitments. Moreover, research to evaluate the impact of the Pledge in terms of its influence on the experience of estranged students within institutions and across the UK, and the impact that pledges make on the experiences of under-represented groups of students more broadly, would be opportune here.

The analysis of Pledge promises has highlighted that whilst the four key areas of support stipulated by SA – financial, accommodation, mental health and wellbeing and outreach and transition are prioritised by almost all the Pledge signatories, within these areas, there is a lot of variability. Frequently, universal support offered to all students is highlighted and, in some cases, estranged students are prioritised for it but in some cases they are not. For example, in relation to the types of accommodation available to, and prioritised for estranged students, this can depend on the institution's stocks of residential properties and availability such that some HEPs, understandably, are able to promise more than others or at least signpost to Purpose-Built Student Accommodation run by private providers (Hurst, 2022). The 'This is Us' community (a community of young people who are estranged and/or care leavers on Unite Foundation scholarships) found that while 36 percent of universities signposted to help on rent guarantors, fewer provided a rent guarantor service for students (Ellison, 2023). Guarantors for rented accommodation is an issue that has been repeatedly highlighted in relation to students without family support. The charity, Buttle UK, found that estranged young people struggle to find guarantors (Buttle UK, 2022). In the absence of a guarantor, students may be asked to provide six or even 12 months' rent payment in advance (Ellison, 2023). For estranged students this is particularly challenging given their lack of family financial support but is "*unaffordable*" (Bhartwas, 2023, 14) amidst a cost-of-living crisis and increase in the cost of student accommodation, estimated to be on average, a rise of 14.6 per cent over the last two academic years (HEPI, 2023), putting estranged students at real risk of homelessness. A commitment amongst Stand Alone Pledge signatories to work towards providing a rent guarantor service for students would make an enormous difference to potential estranged students thinking about applying to university or moving between accommodation providers.

Whilst support for estranged students' wellbeing and mental health is rightly supported by over 90 per cent of Pledge signatories, in some way, the data reveal that this is often in relation to universal wellbeing support offered to all students with fewer tailored support options for estranged students with mental health conditions. This is of particular concern when the research highlights that estranged students frequently have poor mental health and/or diagnosed mental health conditions,

requiring ongoing support throughout their time at university, sometimes "*arising from their experiences of the care system or estrangement prior to accessing higher education*" (Stevenson et al., 2020, 24). Recent research with estranged students in Scotland, for example, found that amongst interviewees were "*high levels of complex trauma resulting from their estrangement. Trauma negatively impacted on their mental health in a number of ways including anxiety, depression, eating disorders, self-harm and suicidal ideation and behaviour*" (Minty et al, 2022, 58). The students in their study suggested that institutions could be more "*proactive*" in promoting their mental health support to estranged students (ibid).

Support measures for estranged students as they graduate and progress into further study and/or employment such as work experience or internship opportunities specifically targeted at estranged students, institutional financial support for postgraduate study or accommodation are in short supply. However, research into estranged students' experiences has repeatedly highlighted that this time is particularly vulnerable as they do not have a family home to return to should they not find a job or be able to afford postgraduate study, as the OfS describe, they "*often experience an upheaval from the relative safety of higher education*" (OfS, 2020a).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Following our analysis of results, we suggest the following to enhance existing provision of support for estranged students at Pledge institutions:

1. It can be difficult for estranged students to identify the support available to them at their place of study (Spacey and Sanderson, 2021) and our analysis indicates that the full range of support detailed in the Pledge commitments is not always effectively or consistently promoted. This was also noted in a recent review of support for estranged students in Scotland including analysis of Scottish Pledge signatories which found that amongst HEPs with websites "*there were considerable differences between the institutions in terms of the amount of information they provided to students. Some included detailed lists of the types of support they offer in relation to finance, accommodation, and academic and pastoral support, while others provided little information, instead encouraging estranged students to make contact with the team to see what support they might be able to access*" (Minty et al., 2022, 68).

   We suggest that all Pledge signatories' signpost to relevant, current, institutional financial, pastoral, academic and mental health support, for example, through a dedicated web page and/or social media presence and "*actively promote this information to students and other key stakeholders*" (Stevenson et al., 2020, 17) as well as pre- and post-application/enrolment. The inclusion of a named contact also helps build trust with estranged students and has been identified in numerous studies as crucial (Stevenson et al., 2020; Sanderson and Spacey, 2021).

Furthermore, many estranged students become estranged after they have enrolled at university (Spacey and Sanderson, 2021), so it is important that information about support does not sit solely within information that is aimed at the access/application stage. Indeed, the Student Loans Company now permits estranged students to declare estrangement at any point in the academic year because some young people are only able to break contact once they can access the relevant support (Blake, 2023).

2. Consider providing a rent guarantor service if your HEP does not already have one, whether directly or through a third party, for estranged students. See the #BeOurGuarantor campaign from the Unite Foundation for more information.

3. Some institutions already make effective use of the Stand Alone brand and logo and even the Pledge letter itself, in their student-facing online information and communications. We suggest that all Pledge signatories make use of these branding tools to strengthen the visibility of the support available for estranged students within their institution while raising student and staff awareness of the work and support offered by Stand Alone.

4. Where HEPs align their support for estranged students with that offered for care experienced students, packages were more comprehensive. Encouraging Pledge holders to consider the relevance of strategic and regulatory objectives like widening participation plans, targets, and their related obligations to care experienced students may facilitate further development of support for ES without significant input of additional resources from the institution.

5. Crucially, providers that have signed up to the Pledge need to keep that support offer current as well as "*actively implemented and monitored*" (Taylor and Costa, 2019, 3).

We also recommend the following actions to mobilise and/or enhance support for estranged students at non-Pledge institutions by:

• Taking the Stand Alone Pledge. In its *Effective Practice Advice on ES*, the OfS encourages providers to take the Pledge (OfS, 2020a).

• Visiting the EaCES website; a resource put together by estranged and care experienced students including the *EaCES Handbook* (EaCES, 2023) and a page for HE staff explaining the barriers EaCE students may face and how best to support them.

Finally, all HEPs would be advised to reflect upon their current level of formalised support for estranged students, taking into consideration the guidance provided by UCAS working with Stand Alone to support institutions as the new question to identify estranged students in the UCAS application for 2023 entry was brought in (applicants can select 'yes' from a drop down box to the question that asks if they are estranged

from parents in the 'More about me' section (UCAS, 2023b)). This includes suggestions relating to the various stages of the estranged students' lifecycle and examples of good practice including quick wins, medium and long term changes required to support estranged students based on an analysis of good practice from APPs which referred to their support for ES (UCAS, 2023a).

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