

Supporting care-experienced and estranged students in higher education – responding to Covid-19

During the first week of the Covid-19 lockdown over 23-27 March, Become, Stand Alone, the National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL), the Unite Foundation and Spectra carried out a UK-wide survey of higher education students who are either care-experiencedⁱ or estrangedⁱⁱ. The survey aimed to understand the challenges which students without family support were facing at this time and the additional support they would like to ensure they could continue their courses or graduate this year. 251 students responded to the survey.

Finance

Students were most concerned about loss of income without the employment they rely upon to top up their student finance funding to pay for rent, bills and for basic food and supplies. Respondents reported being unable to find new paid employment or access Universal Credit as a full-time student.

62% said that the ability to earn money was one of their main concerns.

50% said they were worried about getting essential supplies and/or food.

Care-experienced and estranged students need immediate emergency funding and financial help for over the summer months when they do not receive student finance payments, as well as help getting key supplies and essential medication – especially if they are in a high-risk group, have caring responsibilities or are self-isolating.

Emerging practice

Some institutions are providing access to hardship funds, often with priority for specific groups, well as offering help with finding employment and delivering food parcels or meals for students on campus.

Loneliness and mental health

Many students without family support were worried about their mental health and wellbeing due to social isolation, with increased stress and anxiety about their immediate and long-term futures.

55% said they were particularly worried about feeling lonely and isolated.

Students without family support should continue to have access to virtual mental health and counselling support from their institutions if available, and colleges and universities should facilitate informal peer contact for students in similar situations

Emerging practice

Colleges and universities are providing help through institutional named contacts for care-experienced and estranged students and signposting to other support services. They're also moving appointments for counselling and other services online and establishing online social groups for those remaining on campus.

Accommodation

Respondents feared becoming homeless through losing their accommodation, either due to inability to pay rent or decisions made by student accommodation providers.

41% said they felt informed about how Covid-19 affected their accommodation.

Students need clarity over their accommodation arrangements, including over the summer, and guarantees from institutions and accommodation providers that they will be able to remain there if they need to without penalty.

Emerging practice

Some institutions are giving students the option to remain in university for extended periods and relaxing rent payments to recognise the financial strain which many students are experiencing.

Course and academic study

Students reported lacking access to equipment (e.g. laptop) and software to facilitate online study, worries about upcoming assignment deadlines, a lack of information on exams, progression to the next year of study and graduation, and poor understanding from staff about their personal circumstances

62% said they were worried about their ability to complete their courses.

55% said they felt informed about how Covid-19 affected their college or university.ⁱⁱⁱ

All students need consistent and regular communication from their institutions regarding plans for course delivery and assessment, as well as significant extensions to assignment deadlines and access to reliable IT equipment and internet connections so they can study at home.

Emerging practice

Existing examples of support from institutions includes immediate extensions to assignment deadlines and cancellation of exams, some with automatic progression to the next year of study, as well as regular contact from tutors and support with independent remote working (e.g. study equipment and skills support).

ⁱ Survey definition for self-disclosure by respondent: Care-experienced i.e. you've spent some time in care when you were younger - this might include time spent living with foster carers, with a relative who isn't your mum or dad, or in a children's home.

ⁱⁱ Survey definition for self-disclosure by respondent: Estranged i.e. you're studying without the support and approval of a family network

ⁱⁱⁱ A survey of the Unite Foundation's scholars carried out a week prior found that over 80% of respondents felt informed at that time about how Covid-19 affected their institution. This suggests a drop in confidence and understanding amongst students without family support after lockdown measures were put in place.

Our asks

Since the survey and with the continuation of the Covid-19 lockdown, support for care-experienced and estranged students by HE providers is growing with some examples of outstanding practice. However, it remains unacceptably inconsistent across the sector, and not all students without family networks will have access to the support they need to remain on their courses. Ensuring that these students are able to continue their studies requires immediate efforts from institutions, sector bodies and governments.

Care-experienced and estranged students:

- are absolutely reliant on temporary and part-time work that is no longer available in order to support their living costs;
- often have no alternative home to return to, or practical and emotional support in times of crisis or hardship, due to the lack of family networks;
- are at extremely high risk of homelessness; and
- may become reliant on local authority services that are already under extreme pressure if unable to continue in their studies.

We ask that the UK, Welsh, Scottish and Northern Ireland governments enact the following emergency support activities:

Reducing financial hardship

1. Introduce an emergency grant to assist care-experienced and estranged students with living expenses while access to employment is curtailed.¹

Boosting wellbeing and support:

2. Write to all HE providers requesting they ensure provision of effective wellbeing support services, with particular reference to the mental health of those at risk from loneliness and isolation.

Preventing homelessness:

3. Liaise with providers of Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) and representative bodies of landlords to ensure contractual flexibility for care-experienced and estranged students, recognising that preventing homelessness is more effective and humane than addressing its effects.

Ensuring academic continuity:

4. Require universities to conduct an audit of their students' access to the IT equipment necessary to complete their courses, and make available loan equipment to those without the necessary resources to work remotely.

¹ We recommend that this grant should be non-repayable, based on existing evidence of eligibility where possible, and delivered with minimal administrative burden for students and delivery agencies alike.

We recommend that this grant should be available to all care-experienced and estranged students, and that those who do not already have estranged student or care leaver status should have the ability to apply for the grant with a supporting statement from their HE provider, recognising that the normal forms of evidence may be impossible to collate at the present time.