

It's All About The Money: The Influence Of Family Estrangement, Accommodation Struggles and Homelessness On Student Success in UK Higher Education

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Abstract: Finding, funding and fitting into student accommodation brings multiple and complex challenges for young people who are estranged from their family and cannot depend on their parents for emotional, material or financial support during their time in higher education. This paper draws on the experiences of 564 estranged students in UK higher education, aged 18–25, who have broken communicative contact with their biological or adoptive parents and who are not recognised as vulnerable by their local authority. It finds that a proportion of estranged students struggle with homelessness issues throughout the student life cycle. Furthermore, it finds typical student accommodation can be financially out of reach for estranged young people, exacerbated by expectations for students to go home during the summer break. Together these factors push estranged students into a life that is often detached from the community of their institution and their peers. Of particular concern is that such factors inhibit a focus on academic studies, with an impact on retention and student success. The paper concludes by outlining how key interventions from higher-education providers and government departments can maximise student success for estranged students, in order to inform policy and practice for those who lack family capital and the support of corporate parenting structures.

Key words: family estrangement, higher education, homelessness, belonging, student success

Introduction: Estranged students in UK higher education

There are assumptions in the higher education (HE) policy environment about the ability of young people aged 18–25 to be ‘dependent’ on family relationships, endowing students with the relevant financial and material support that is required during their studies. This is evident in the student maintenance loans system, which means tests students against the household

income of their biological or legally adoptive parents, assuming dependency on this household, and obligating parents to contribute to the maintenance costs that a student will incur whilst studying (Ellet, 2017; Gov.uk, 2017). Furthermore, university accommodation policies and practices can require students to present deposits and a guarantor to access institutional halls or private halls, as well as limiting tenancy agreements to term time. This leaves three months over the summer period when students are expected to vacate accommodation and typically go home (Bland and Shaw, 2015).

However, it is known that not all students have functional family relationships (Bland and Shaw, 2015). The barriers that such policies create for those who cannot depend on their family has been outlined in research around young people leaving local authority care and their journeys into higher education (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014; Jackson, 2005). Such students are commonly referred to as ‘care leavers’ⁱ. Over the previous decade, this literature has helped institutions appreciate the difficulties that care leavers face in finding and retaining stable accommodation during their time in higher education. Consequently, significant changes in institutional policy and practice within UK universities have taken place (Cotton, Nash and Kneale, 2014).

Yet there are a significant number of young people experiencing family estrangement – sometimes termed ‘young people in difficulty’ – who come from a comparable background of familial dysfunction to care leavers but who have not experienced intervention from local authorities and the care system (Simon, 2008) and have no entitlement to corporate parenting. Such students are increasingly referred to as ‘estranged students’ (Office for Fair Access, 2016).

Little critical attention has been paid to these young people and their subsequent experiences in higher education. This is a significant omission since, as a consequence, these students remain largely unidentified and invisible in relation to student support and policy making. This in turn has implications not only for their equitable student experience but also for their retention and success.

Furthermore, in HE, data acquired from loans provider Student Loans Company Ltd indicates that the number of estranged students is substantially larger than that of care leavers (Bland and Shaw, 2015), and that the retention rate for estranged students is three times lower than the national average, with 14% withdrawing or suspending from their studies (Office for Fair Access, 2016). Estranged young people face the same, if not more, barriers in comparison to care leavers when trying to find accommodation as independent young people (Simon, 2008) and whilst moving through the student life cycle.

This paper explores the key issues that estranged students face when moving through the student life cycle, focusing on the link between estranged

students' experiences of finding, funding and fitting into student accommodation and the impact of subsequent poor finance and unstable housing on their sense of persistence, belonging and success.

In doing so, the paper builds on the definitions of vulnerable undergraduate students in UK higher education. It associates and links estranged students – who, along with all people experiencing family estrangement, have been the subject of limited academic discussion (Blake, 2017) – to literature around their care-leaver peers, who have faced comparable struggles to belong and find a sense of stability after leaving care and transitioning into higher education (Cotton et al., 2014; Jackson, 2005).

The paper builds on the literature around estranged young people and 'young people in difficulty' (Simon, 2008) and challenges the implicit notions that students aged 18–25 who have no familial support to depend on have always experienced care, or have been recognised by local authorities, and are part of a corporate parenting structure.

Finally, the paper concludes by outlining how key interventions from universities, colleges and government departments can improve the student experience for such students in order to inform policy and practice, ultimately improving retention and student success, and preventing further homelessness.

Literature review

Definitions of Family Estrangement

Definitions of family estrangement are varied and much contested in the literature. However, in this paper, I will work with the quasi-legal policy definition of family estrangement crafted by the UK Department for Education (DfE) and implemented in practice by Student Finance England, Wales and Northern Ireland (SFE, SFW, SFNI), and I will refer to 'estranged students' as being those whose family relationships are expected to be irreconcilable and who have usually experienced no communicative contact with their biological or legally adoptive parents for one year prior to commencement of the first year of their studies. (Office for Fair Access, 2016). This concurs with both Agllias's definition of family estrangement and Barker's defining of a family relationship that lacks social capital (Agllias, 2011; Barker, 2012).

Family Estrangement

Family relationships are assumed to look and function in a certain way (Blake, 2017) and parents and children are typically expected to have a relationship characterised by closeness and unconditional love (Scharp and McLaren, 2017). Furthermore, family life is regarded to be the 'bedrock' of

social capital (Winter, 2000), which is said to be inherently connected to other forms of capital, both economic and cultural (Bourdieu, 1985). These various forms of capital may ultimately help a person to build an advantageous position in society.

Much of the literature around family estrangement indicates that it can be a healthy response to an unhealthy family situation (Agllias, 2011; Scharp and McLaren, 2017) or a move to ensure safety and survival from violence and abuse in the family (Agllias, 2013). Abuse, clashes of personality and values, and mismatched expectations around family roles and relationships are seen as common factors that contribute to the breakdown of relationships between parents, siblings and children (Blake, 2015).

Blake builds on this in a recent literature review, indicating that the factors contributing to family estrangement are diverse and include feeling a lack of support, acceptance and/or love; a family member choosing one relationship over another; and having different values from one another (Blake, 2017). The same analysis concludes that family estrangement may be more common in communities that are more marginalised and stigmatised, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+) communities. However, the literature does not discuss the student population and young people specifically.

Estranged Young People and Accommodation

Estranged young people account for between 1.4% and 1.6% of the population of students who apply for financial support from Student Loans Company Ltd, the total number being around 9,338 – a figure much higher than that of care leavers (Bland and Shaw, 2015). Academic discussion around people experiencing family estrangement is sparse in general (Blake 2017), and this is no different for young people who are estranged from their family and transitioning into higher education.

Simon's 2008 study examines estranged young people and their struggle to find, fund and retain independent accommodation, in comparison to their care-leaver peers (Simon, 2008). The study examines two samples of vulnerable young people: care leavers aged 17–24 and 'young people in difficulty' aged 16–29, many of whom would qualify as estranged from family by the policy definition used in this paper. Many of the young people in difficulty were 'distanced' from their families, and were not in local authority care, but could have qualified for local authority support had their difficulties emerged earlier in their lives. The study builds on the picture of young people in difficulty that emerged from care-leaver research, which mentions that the young people who had self-referred into care during their teenage years had been met with reluctance from local authorities to actually take them into care, thus allowing them to escape abusive families (Jackson, 2005).

Simon's study indicates that how young people felt about their lives was closely related to the type of accommodation they were living in and the associated problems it brought with it. Her findings suggest that care leavers were in receipt of more consistent housing support, both at the point of leaving care and in their transition into independent living. Having friends or family that they could turn to was a key factor in accessing housing, and studies have supported the idea that care leavers rely on other family members, and birth parents, for both emotional and material support when moving (Cotton et al., 2014; Jackson, 2005; Simon, 2008).

In contrast, young people in difficulty most often turned to friends or romantic partners (Simon, 2008). Their choice of accommodation was often more limited and less autonomous than that offered to care leavers, and care leavers were much less likely to experience homelessness, defined by rough sleeping or temporarily lodging with friends or relatives. In comparison to care leavers, young people in difficulty were more likely to consider that their life had 'got harder than it was a year ago' as they progressed in independent living (Simon, 2008).

These findings are a useful starting point for amplifying the unique needs of young people in difficulty when accessing accommodation. However, the study does not discuss young people in difficulty who have transitioned into higher education and institutional accommodation.

A Focus On Care Leavers

The literature around struggles with accommodation in higher education has almost exclusively been focused on care leavers. The seminal study *By Degrees: The First Year* (Quigley et al., 2003) explored transitions of care leavers into university and college. Despite 60% referencing backgrounds of severe abuse and neglect, only a small minority in the study deliberately had no contact with their parents. The participants all qualified to be supported by their local authority as their corporate parent.

When talking about accommodation experiences, students who participated in the study by Quigley et al. mentioned the isolation of seeing other students receiving support from loving families (Cotton et al., 2014; Jackson, 2005). The organisation and communication capacity of local authorities with regard to financial assistance was a key factor in the accommodation that care leavers accessed, with many missing out on halls placements when financial support had not been secured or communicated due to difficulties in obtaining the required deposits and advance payment policies proving problematic (Jackson, 2005). This left many students living in isolation from other students and university life, often in council houses. For some, the implicit instability of university accommodation, and the threats of being desolate during vacation periods, were enough to dampen their appetite for further study and put them off higher education entirely (Cotton et al., 2014; Jackson, 2005).

Stress, finance and accommodation were linked for care leavers, who struggled when local authorities did not pay their rent and they subsequently faced potential eviction. Some had to work substantial hours to meet the costs of university, which meant missing out on social experiences with their peers (Cotton et al., 2014). Although many care-leaver students were offered inadequate and unsuitable accommodation during their vacations (Jackson, 2005), local authorities honoured their legal obligation to fund their accommodation over the summer period.

Belonging and Student Success

Belonging and relatedness is one of the most important needs of all students to function well in all types of educational environments (Finn, 1989; Osterman, 2000; Thomas, L., 2012). The feeling of belonging may have a direct influence on motivation. Perceived support and the sense of belonging are expected to increase a learner's belief in their success and subsequently their academic motivation (Goodenow, 1993). Belonging has been related to student persistence and progression. Tinto's longstanding research has focused on the persistence and integration of North American college students (Tinto, 1975, 1998), evidencing that students who engage in formal and informal academic and social integration experiences are less likely to leave their institution. In part, this is because students reformulate their commitment as a result of such integrative experiences, with positive experiences reinforcing commitment to their studies. Family background and prior schooling experiences has been presented as a key variable in Tinto's research, along with the amount of paid work undertaken and student-to-student interactions.

The terms 'sense of belonging' and 'integration' are often used interchangeably, but Hurtado and Carter (1997) have argued that belonging is a measure distinct from integration. They position it as a psychological factor, focusing on the students' feelings of connectedness or cohesion to the institution. Their research explored a set of factors associated with a sense of belonging with measures focusing on students' attachment to the campus community, and concluded that these factors were essential to student persistence.

Hoffman et al. (2002) went further, conceptualising the main dimensions present in a sense of belonging. These were reduced to empathic faculty understanding, perceived peer support, perceived isolation, perceived faculty support and comfort, and perceived classroom comfort.

More recent data from Professor Liz Thomas (2012) supports these theories, showing that students who consider leaving university are less likely to be engaged with peers and their institution. The same study identifies three primary factors that cause students to consider withdrawing from higher education: academic issues, feelings of isolation and/or not fitting in, and concern about achieving future aspirations.

However, even more recent research from Dr Kate Thomas (2015) cites that such theories of belonging are not always useful to non-traditional learners, such as part-time mature students, who may have restricted capabilities to integrate within the student community. Furthermore, existing theories make broad assumptions about the type of accommodation available to students and their capacity to access it. Thus, the existing theories of belonging do not position access to accommodation as a risk factor in increasing isolation, or to the development of integration or belonging.

Research

The aim of this research is to explore the relationship between students who are estranged from their family, aged 18–25, and their experiences of homelessness and accommodation struggles whilst studying in UK universities and colleges. It will aim to highlight the subsequent impact on retention and success of such struggles. In presenting findings from the empirical research, the paper outlines how key interventions from universities and colleges can improve the student life cycle for such students in order to inform policy and practice.

Methodology

This paper uses the data of 564 estranged students who responded to an anonymous online survey facilitated by the Student Loans Company Ltd and charity Stand Alone in June 2015. Student Loans Company Ltd controlled the sampling and elicited a sample of 5,000 students from an eligible pool of 8,116 students held on their database who had been defined as ‘irreconcilably estranged’ from their living biological or adoptive parents for one year prior to the commencement of their studies. This status had been verified in the process of applying for finance from Student Finance England, Wales or Northern Ireland.

The sample of 5,000 matched the demographic profile of the overall group and was representative of the students’ characteristics in age, gender, domicile and status of study. The questionnaire was open for two weeks and attracted responses from 564 students, representing an 11% response rate.

European Union and European Economic Area nationals were excluded from the study in order to focus on home students. Also excluded were participants who did not give an email address and therefore could not receive the online participation link. Young people resident in Scotland do not interact with Student Loans Company Ltd to attain finance, and therefore it was not possible to access their data and include them in this research. However, as a number of young people who accessed finance through Student

Loans Company Ltd used their finance to study at Scottish universities and colleges, this study remains relevant to the HE sector in Scotland.

The demographic profile of the eligible pool, sample and respondents is shown in Table 1. Ethnicity was not part of the sampling procedure, as such information is not volunteered by all students when applying for finance with SFE, SFW or SFNI. However, 31% of the 564 respondents who took part in the study stated that they were from non-white, minority ethnic groups.

Table 1: The demographic profile of eligible pool, sample and respondents

	Pool (8116)	Sample (5000)	Respondents (564)
SFE	93%	93%	94%
SFNI	3%	3%	2%
SFW	5%	5%	4%
Age			
18	2%	2%	2%
19	11%	11%	10%
20	19%	19%	22%
21	23%	23%	26%
22	18%	18%	18%
23	13%	13%	11%
24	9%	9%	7%
25	5%	5%	4%
Sex			
F	60%	60%	72%
M	40%	40%	28%

Status of Study			
Approved	94%	94%	94%
Suspended	2%	2%	3%
Withdrawn	4%	4%	3%

An online questionnaire was developed, comprising 29 questions that focused on access to finance, accommodation and the support offered both from the Student Loans Company Ltd and their university or college. The survey included both quantitative and open-format questions (the latter with verbatim responses), allowing students the opportunity to communicate the depth of their experiences and contextualise selected quantitative questions. Questions were reviewed using a steering committee of estranged young people studying in two major English universities, which was organised by the charity Stand Alone. This facilitated a tailoring of the language, ensuring it was not judgmental in tone and clear in wording and structure.

Questions were planned to reflect differing stages in the student life cycle. Those relevant to this paper are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2: Questions asked reflecting stages of the student life cycle

Stages of the Student Life Cycle	Question
Recruitment and Enrolment: Pre-entry and Transition	<p>At what age did you become completely estranged from both of your parents (i.e. no contact with either parent)?</p> <p>At what stage of your education did your estrangement from both of your parents begin (i.e. no contact with either parent)?</p> <p>Did you register homeless before you started your course?</p> <p>Have you ever been in Local Authority care? (Please tick all applicable options.)</p> <p>Where are you currently living?</p> <p>Can you tell us the reason(s) behind your choice of accommodation?</p>
Engagement: Life at University	Do you find the current student support package from Student Finance

Stages of the Student Life Cycle	Question
	<p>England/Wales/Northern Ireland is sufficient to cover your living costs?</p> <p>Please expand on why you think the current student support financial support is not sufficient to cover your living costs.</p> <p>Did you register homeless during your studies?</p> <p>If you registered homeless or considered registering homeless during your studies, can you tell us more about this?</p>
<p>Progression: Withdrawal and Suspension</p>	<p>Have you ever withdrawn, suspended or deferred your current course of study? (By suspended or deferred we mean you have taken a break from your studies for a period of time and then returned to complete your course.)</p> <p>If you answered yes, can you explain your reasons for withdrawing, suspending or deferring?</p> <p>If you answered, 'I considered it', can you explain your reasons for considering withdrawing, suspending or deferring?</p> <p>Have you accessed student support in your university or higher-education institution?</p>

Ethical approval was gained from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills in advance of data collection, and support was offered to any students who felt distressed by taking part in the survey. There was prominent signposting to Stand Alone, a charity with specialist skills in working with family estrangement, and a list was provided of trained student support contacts at UK higher-education institutions.

The online format was chosen to enable students who might feel ashamed or embarrassed by their family situation to come forward and take part anonymously. This method allowed students who might not otherwise have come forward, for fear of judgment, to remain anonymous and complete the survey in their own time and in an environment of their choice.

The descriptive statistics were processed in Excel and the verbatim data was thematically analysed (Braun and Clarke, 2006) by the author, drawing

key themes and codes, which were then applied to the whole data set. The first stage of this process entailed the author becoming familiar with the responses to qualitative questions. Following this familiarisation with the data, the responses were open-coded, using codes that closely resembled the respondents' own words. Overlapping codes were merged and the final codes were grouped according to themes. The results below are grouped according to themes, and direct quotations from the participants are provided.

Findings and discussion

The findings presented are structured around the student life cycle so that the difficulties in this linear journey through higher education can be appreciated.

Recruitment and Enrolment: Pre-entry and Transition

Pre-entry

The respondents' data suggests that estranged students most often broke away from their family between the ages of 16 and 18 years of age, ceasing contact with their living biological or adoptive parent(s) during sixth form or further-education college. 79% of the respondents had become completely estranged from their living biological or adoptive parents by or before the age of 18. This suggests that there had been considerable family disruption for students before entry into university and that many respondents had come from environments that were far from stable and loving.

'My mother was extremely physically and mentally abusive towards me. She then disowned me – literally. I had nowhere to go, and slept rough some nights. Some nights I used what little money I had to stay in hotels when they were cheap. I ended up staying with my boyfriend and his family although we were not in a serious relationship. They have been kind hearted to me, but whenever we fought, I was kicked out of the house. I had also registered with the Foyer once but there were not enough rooms at the time and so had to sleep rough.'

Thirty-three per cent of respondents were impacted by homelessness issues prior to entry and had experiences of formal or informal homelessness, citing experiences of living in temporary or crisis accommodation. Within this percentage, 15% had formally registered homeless, with female respondents more likely to have done so. Eighteen per cent had considered registering homeless before they started their course, with male respondents more likely to have considered it. Seventy-nine respondents gave qualitative answers that illustrated their pre-entry circumstances in more detail.

Students who registered homeless were most often living in transient hostels and shelters or bed-and-breakfast accommodation. This supports

Simon's picture of young people in difficulty being more likely to be in shared accommodation often run by charitable organisations (Simon, 2008). Students who had only considered formally declaring themselves homeless cited a degree of support was present in the form of friends' parents, who were willing to house them temporarily and save them from more formal homelessness and rough sleeping. For example: 'It's difficult to get a house, especially with no prior housing. If I hadn't been taken in by a friend's family I would have had to register homeless.' In some cases, students were able to find more easily accessible (but unsecure) private rented accommodation to prevent homelessness.

'When I left my parents' house I was going to go into a hostel, but I managed to find [a] property which didn't charge rent upfront. Since moving into the property, I have had a lot of difficulties with my landlord. The police, housing standards and Shelter are working together to help his tenants.'

There is little mention of support from local authorities and statutory services, and a strong picture of self-reliance emerged. Where local authorities were mentioned, they were not viewed as helpful. Students had commonly tried to seek support but had been either turned away or rejected as a non-priority case.

'During the end of college, I went to the council and told them I was homeless but I was not priority, so they didn't really help me get a room or any sort of help at all.'

This builds on the picture of young people in difficulty from care-leaver research, which mentions that the young people who had self-referred into care during their teenage years had battled with reticence from local authorities to remove them from abusive families (Jackson, 2005). Furthermore, it supports the view of numerous charitable organisations that local authorities no longer have the resources to support estranged young people in difficulty when they become homeless (Coram, 2014).

Respondents were asked, 'Have you ever been in local authority care?' Fifty-nine per cent indicated that they hadn't and 17% indicated that social services had been aware of their circumstances yet they hadn't become a 'looked-after child'. A further 19% indicated that they had experienced local authority care, but before the age of 16. Thus, the vast majority of respondents were not necessarily known to local authorities pre-entry, as would be the case with a statutory care leaver. Despite experiencing critical family breakdown, over half had experienced no interaction with the care system or social services.

From this evidence, it can be seen that estranged young people lack the visibility of care leavers, who are supported statutorily by their local authority as a corporate parent as part of the Leaving Care Act, 2000. Consequently, they lack basic rights to statutory accommodation as a priority, financial support with their education and a dedicated support worker, as a care leaver

would have the right to receive (National Homelessness Advice Service, 2017).

The data shows that the entitlements of estranged young people are fundamentally lacking in comparison to those of many care-leaver populations. Moreover, estranged young people are expected to be entirely self-sufficient or draw on social networks outside of the family and local authorities for support.

Transition

As respondents made their journey into higher education, accommodation options were primarily limited by their financial means and a hesitancy to give up secure local support networks. Thirty-one per cent of students did not move away from the area that they regarded as their home city, county or region. When asked, 'Where are you currently living?' 58% of respondents stated that they were living in private rented accommodation, 26% of whom lived in private accommodation, not with other students. Seventeen per cent of all respondents chose to live with a friend, guardian or another family member, while 26% of estranged students were living in university or private halls of residence.

A significant minority of first-year estranged students had decided against living in halls of residence, private halls or shared accommodation with other students, with 47% of first-year estranged students choosing accommodation options that meant they would not be staying with other students. Only 39% resided in halls of residence, either private or university owned. These figures are in contrast to the general population of first-year students, of whom 79% intend to live in either halls, private halls or shared houses with other students (Higher Education Policy Institute, 2017).

Living in isolation from other students, and in some cases the university campus, could present a risk factor to the formation of belonging for first-year estranged students. It may heighten their chances of withdrawal should they miss the opportunity to form networks with peers or become part of campus and academic life, which the literature indicates is crucial to developing a sense of belonging and continuation (Thomas, 2012).

Qualitative answers gave insight into key reasons for the respondents' choice to stay in private rented accommodation rather than with other students. Affordability was the key factor, for example: 'I was staying here before my course. I had no money to pay for deposit and rent in advance for student accommodation.' Respondents, like their care-leaver peers, also had the summer vacation period to think about and chose accommodation with this in mind: 'I needed to live somewhere where I could stay over the summer as I don't have a home to go back to.' There were instances where students chose isolation and to stay around trusted networks: 'I prefer being alone and renting a room from the woman who was my guardian. It was the most secure

accommodation I could get where I could be alone.’ However, second-year estranged students living in halls of residence indicated that they did so because there were barriers to accessing private rented accommodation, with or without other students: ‘I had no guarantor to sign a house with most student letting agents. Therefore I was forced to pay a higher price for university accommodation.’

Engagement: Life at University

In alignment with the care-leaver literature, estranged learners noticed differences between their situation and those of their peers who had family support, differences that at times exacerbated their isolation, increasing their risk of withdrawal. However, in contrast to care-leaver students, they felt this most profoundly in the form of extreme sustained poverty throughout their studies, derived from a lack of additional parental support to the student loan package or the support of a corporate parent. When asked, ‘Is the student support package enough to meet your living costs?’ 53% answered no, 29% said yes and 17% were not sure. Those most likely to say no lived in private rented accommodation not with other students.

The qualitative answers showed accommodation to be a key cause of such financial hardship. Students struggled to meet the spiralling costs of private rent in cities seeing growth in desirability and higher costs of living:

‘Bath is an incredibly expensive city. The loan and the grant just covers accommodation and two months’ food, budgeting £75 a month for food.’

In some cases, university accommodation was more expensive than the total student support package provided, meaning students were sometimes left with stark choices between work and study.

‘Student Finance offered me a maintenance loan of £3,731 – accommodation alone is £6400, and the average cost of other living expenses is £4000 a year. This leaves me requiring at least £6700 more to fund a year of study. I can’t possibly earn that much doing a part-time job, and I can’t work more as I’d not have time to go to lectures.’

Other students talked about how university policies exacerbated their struggles, prohibiting students from working to supplement their income. Faculties appeared to show a lack of understanding around their financial situation and lack of social capital.

‘I almost declared homelessness because the university told me that I couldn’t get a job during the course and that I would need to be available every day for lessons in the third year.’

Literature around care leavers shows that vacation accommodation presents a challenge (Cotton et al., 2014; Jackson, 2005), and estranged respondents showed similar patterns of struggle over the summer holidays, albeit without any financial support from a corporate parent. Indeed, students most commonly attributed their financial struggles to the fact they couldn’t

go home over the summer period, leaving them to find large sums of money for additional housing and living costs.

‘It [my student loan] covered the cost of living during the term time but due to the nature of accommodation during the summer, it did not cover that. Most students go home over summer to live, reducing their cost of living, however with no place to go home to, the cost of living is increased.’

Students noticed the implicit assumptions that parents would be a source of support over this period both financially and materially: ‘They expect parents to pay costs over summer holidays. I have had to get many short-term loans for the summer to pay rent and buy food.’ The qualitative data showed that this left many students in cycles of debt.

‘During the summer holidays, accommodation for people like me is very expensive and the student loan does not help at all. I’m always paying for summer with my overdraft, but I always start the new term in minus.’

Poverty is a significant and universal risk factor for homelessness (Somerville, 2013). The findings of this study support this: when students entered the summer period, a number were unable to find affordable summer accommodation, either from their university or within the private rented sector, leaving them to consider homelessness.

Eleven per cent of students had considered registering homeless whilst studying, which is almost the same figure as the students who had considered it pre-entry. Financial and material struggles during the summer period were the key themes when looking at verbatim answers from the question ‘Why did you consider registering homeless?’ For many, it was a last resort:

‘I considered registering as homeless when I left my first year accommodation at halls and I could not afford any other accommodation for the summer.’

Informal homelessness, such as sofa surfing, was common. Much like the picture pre-entry, students most often mobilised social support from peers:

‘Due to estrangement, I did not have a home to return to during the summer after my first year at university. I thought I would be homeless. However, a friend was able to offer a place to stay for the summer at last minute.’

This analysis shows a student experience that is full of struggle. Such struggles are directly linked to finding suitable, affordable accommodation, which could facilitate a focus on academic success for the student. This basic need appears to be more difficult to satisfy without parental contributions or the material support of a family home during key periods of the year.

Despite the lack of support that was forthcoming from parental, familial or societal means, the students did not lack peer support. The majority had forged or maintained networks to utilise when critical housing situations arose. This builds on Simon’s 2008 study, supporting the idea that young people in difficulty most often draw on friends or partners for support with accommodation.

Progression: Withdrawal and Suspension

Forty-one per cent of the respondents had considered withdrawing or suspending from their course of study, or had actually withdrawn or suspended. This is in accordance with the higher end of the significant minority who consider withdrawal in UK institutions, which was said to be between 37% and 42% (Thomas, 2012). Fourteen per cent of the sample had withdrawn or suspended from their course, which is higher than the national non-continuation rate for UK-domiciled, full-time first degree entrants following year of entry – 5.7% in 2012–13 (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2014).

Students in their first year had the lowest rates of withdrawal or suspension, or consideration of withdrawal or deferral. In comparison, second-, third- and fourth-year students considered withdrawing in much greater numbers, often indicating that stress around accommodation was a reason for withdrawal: ‘I was going through housing issues, therefore I was failing in work assignments and had to leave.’ Financial struggles and debt were most frequently mentioned: ‘I couldn’t cope with financial situation so had to leave to earn money.’ In some cases, students threw light on the severity of their financial deprivation and the choices they had to make: ‘I was unable to get to university a lot of the time, if I wanted to eat that day.’ For some students, it was the culmination of many factors:

‘A lack of resources and money mean a low quality of life, and a lot of anxiety about sustaining myself. Combining that with the work expectations at Oxford, it was too much and became isolating.’

Students clearly felt frustrated at having to compromise their academic progress: ‘I wasn’t finding a way to afford things and study. My studies were being sacrificed so I could earn enough money to live.’

Student persistence and retention is linked to engagement with university staff; the greater the level of university commitment to the welfare of the student, the more likely the student is to achieve social integration and hence persist (Hirschy and Braxton, 2004). Furthermore, Thomas (2012) argues that, if a higher-education institution accepts a student onto a course of study, there is an obligation on that institution to take reasonable steps to ensure that he or she is successful.

The students in this study who had withdrawn or deferred had often not received the kind of welfare support that they feel was needed to help them fundamentally with their situation: ‘I asked about extra financial help and this amounted to nothing other than a temporary loan! Further to this I was offered little help.’

Within the wider group of students, it was very clear that support varied from institution to institution, and some students spoke highly of the support staff who had helped them. Yet despite the consistent struggles of the students

who responded to the study, only 42% had accessed support from their institution, with those who had suspended their studies being more likely to have done so. Twenty-eight per cent of those who hadn't accessed support didn't feel comfortable doing so, while 38% didn't know about support and 15% had tried but had not been successful.

Conclusion

The findings from this research build on the literature around student persistence and show that, for a small group of students who are estranged from their family and who experience financial deprivation linked to accommodation struggles, poverty is a key reason for non-continuation in higher education. This data supports the idea that perceived academic success is crucial to young people when considering withdrawal, and estranged learners will withdraw rather than waste academic opportunities through working to meet the costs of living.

Moreover, the evidence presented in this study indicates that statutory instruments for support and intervention, such as local authorities and social services, have been shown to offer little to students who are estranged from their family, either through lack of knowledge of their situation or, in some instances, the lack of capacity and policies to help. This leaves estranged young people in a precarious position, moving into independence and higher education with no family capital or a corporate parent to offer support at key moments of vulnerability.

These facts alone should be persuasive as to why higher-education providers need to think independently and innovatively about the concept of disadvantage in the student population, not simply relying on local authorities and statutory agencies to inform them of those who may be more likely to lack familial support. Most importantly, both providers and the government should accept that the ability to depend on family members will offer students a significant advantage when it comes to completing the student life cycle.

Enhancing student persistence, success and completion of the student life cycle is not only valuable for higher-education institutions, which have a financial incentive to ensure continuation and retention rates are high, but beneficial to the individual and broader society (Thomas, 2012). There are complex barriers for estranged students, who lack the financial means to live around peers and within the academic or institutional community and thus are at risk of failing to develop a sense of belonging.

It is clear that these findings show that many estranged young people would be destitute over the summer months without the help of peers, who often act as their sole point of support. However, a significant proportion of these students give up the struggle and withdraw or suspend their studies, admitting

defeat due to financial difficulties, unstable housing and their inability to prioritise their course of study.

The study discussed in this paper shows that a surprisingly low number of estranged students were supported by their universities, and many felt uncomfortable in coming forward for support or didn't know support was there for them. Alongside other findings, this trend creates challenges for developing a sense of belonging in higher education.

The evidence from this research suggests that some key innovations in thinking are necessary. Most crucially, the assumption that all students enter higher education with the ability to be dependent on a parent or family must be challenged. This assumption has already been successfully challenged for care leavers, who, despite hard circumstances, may retain sporadic familial support. The higher-education sector should now broaden this understanding of disadvantage to incorporate estranged students who have not been part of the care system but who do not have healthy, dependable and supportive family relationships.

As part of challenging such assumptions, and acting on the findings of this research, the following measures would help to redress the disadvantages experienced by estranged students:

- a specific bursary to help estranged young people to afford accommodation over the summer period
- deposit-free and guarantor-free accommodation for new and returning students
- measures to ensure that university accommodation is affordable, relative to the student support package, and is regulated so the cost does not exceed the maximum maintenance loan
- rent controls and/or rent recommendations for university landlords operating within the private rented sector who are promoted by universities.

In addition, and to ensure that universities are more incentivised to support estranged young people, institutions should become part of the corporate parenting structure for estranged young people, much as has happened with care-leaver populations in Scottish universities.

There is more that the government could do to support estranged young people. For example, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) could revisit policies around housing benefit for students, allowing students who are estranged from their family and not part of a corporate parenting structure to draw on this resource during the summer period.

In addition, policy networks and regulators such as Universities UK and the Office for Students could properly examine the place of family as part of higher-education culture, with a view to ensuring that those who have no

family network to depend on are given the same rights and entitlements as students who are able to be fully or partly dependent on family capital.

ⁱ The broad definition of a care leaver is ‘Any adult who spent time in care as a child (i.e. under the age of 18). Such care could be in foster care, residential care, or other arrangements outside the immediate or extended family. The care could have been provided directly by the state or by the voluntary or private sector. This care would have been approved by the state through a court order or on a voluntary basis.’ (Care Leavers’ Association, 2014)

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