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The experiences of estranged students in further and higher education: a review of the literature

CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS

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1. Introduction

In March 2022, the Scottish Government commissioned ScotCen Social Research (ScotCen) to undertake research on the experiences of estranged students in Scotland. The aim was to provide an insight into the contexts and experiences of estranged students in further and higher education (FE and HE). This literature review accompanies the research report into the experiences of estranged students in further and higher education in Scotland.

To understand more about the experiences of, and available evidence on, estranged students in further and higher education in Scotland, a rapid review of literature published in this area was conducted. The purpose of this review was to inform the development of the qualitative research with estranged students, college and university named contacts and stakeholders. It seeks to draw out the key themes of the literature, and identify any gaps. However, this was a rapid review and should not therefore be considered exhaustive.

2. Methodology

The review included UK publications in academic journals, grey literature and research undertaken by specialist organisations. The literature search was conducted in May and June 2022. All English language documents were included, and studies undertaken outwith the UK were excluded. We focused on literature published within the last 10 years. Searches were conducted using academic catalogues and Google. Search terms initially focused on ‘estrangement’ and ‘estranged student’. This was later expanded to include:

- ‘homeless student’
- ‘LGBTQI+ student’
- ‘student + forced marriage’
- ‘independent student’.

Additionally, researchers drew upon existing literature searches conducted by the Scottish Government, as well as literature identified by stakeholders and members of the Research Advisory Group. In total, we reviewed 64 documents. These included journals, grey literature, policy documents and relevant websites, including those of government bodies across the UK.

3. Definitions of estrangement

Definitions of estrangement vary and are contested, both in the literature and in wider policy frameworks.

In Scotland, definitions of estrangement vary by funding provider. For the purposes of accessing further education (FE) funding, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC) defines estranged students as 'someone who no longer has the support of their family due to a breakdown in their relationship which has led to ceased contact' (SFC, 2022a). For higher education (HE) students, the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) defines estranged students as those who are not in contact with their parents/legal guardian, and where there has been 'a permanent breakdown' in the relationship (2022a). For both SAAS and SFC, students who have experience of care within Scotland would not be considered estranged. However, those whose care experience occurred outside of Scotland, and who are estranged from their parents, carers/ legal guardians, could be classed as estranged.

In England, Student Finance England (SFE) are responsible for administering student funding. They refer to being 'irreconcilably estranged from your parents', that is, not having 'any written or verbal contact with either parent and this is unlikely to change' (Student Finance England, 2022a). They expect that this will have been for a period of 12 months. More broadly, Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) define estrangement as not having 'support from your parents due to a breakdown in your relationship' (UCAS, 2022a).

While these definitions may fit the circumstances of some estranged students, Bland found that 42% of estranged students in the UK were unable to apply their circumstances into the Student Finance England application definition (2015). Research by Costa (2019) in Scotland similarly highlighted that some estranged students could not identify with the 'narrow, and, contested' estrangement definition. It is often assumed that estranged students are those aged under 25. Yet mixed methods research undertaken in England (Stevenson, *et al*., 2020) with estranged students and university staff found that entering HE as a mature student may be preferable but that the funding cut off related to being over 25 meant students may not be eligible for support. Similarly, Taylor and Costa, in their qualitative research with estranged students in Scotland (2019a), note that estrangement 'does not cease or become irrelevant when a student reaches the age of 25.'

The literature also highlights students' own perceptions of estrangement. Students interviewed as part of Spacey and Sanderson's research reported a lack of understanding about what family estrangement was (2021). In another small qualitative study, estranged students reported a general ignorance of what estrangement was and meant among the wider student population. It was often misinterpreted as being disowned by a parent, rather than recognising some estranged students make the decision to leave themselves (Spacey, 2019). Other mixed methods (Stevenson, *et al*., 2020) and quantitative (Bland, 2015) studies have shown that the limitations of estranged student eligibility criteria can lead students to fail to identify themselves as estranged, meaning that they had missed out on support that was available to them.

To address this, Costa (2019) suggested definitions of estrangement should encompass a more comprehensive view of family, age that estrangement occurred, and the length of time passed since relationships had broken down. As Spacey (2019) argued in relation to a small qualitative study of estranged students at a post-92 English university, there is 'not one pathway to or circumstance of estrangement' and so definitions should allow for greater flexibility to account for this.

Research has also shown the difficulty of evidencing estrangement. In Bland and Blake's (2020) survey of estranged students, most did not have access to professionals, such as doctors, lawyers etc who could provide evidence of their estrangement, and the majority reported high levels of stress and anxiety arising from having to find the correct documentation. This led to delays in funding for some, while others said they had to contact their parents to locate documentation, which could be upsetting and very difficult (Spacey and Sanderson, 2021).

4. Contexts of estrangement

While trajectories to estrangement are highly individual and complex, research shows that there is a pattern of specific contexts from which family breakdown emerges (Blake, 2017). In a survey of estranged students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, responses centred around four key reasons: undisclosed abuse in the family; issues with new step-parents after divorce and re-marriage; generational clashes of values and beliefs with immigrant family members, and differences in personalities and values (Bland and Blake, 2020). Earlier research undertaken for Stand Alone (Bland, *et al*., 2015) found that emotional abuse was the most common, followed by mismatched expectations about family roles and relationships, clashes of personality or values, neglect, issues relating to mental health problems, and traumatic family events.

There is broadly a consensus across the research regarding the age at which estrangement typically occurs, with most becoming estranged in their late teens, between the ages of 16-19 (Bland, 2015; Bland and Shaw, 2015; Commissioner for Fair Access, 2020). Together these studies highlight the way in which a clash of values between parent and child intersects with age, as young people gain more independence as they reach adulthood.

Several studies have explored the ways in which abusive familial relationships contribute to the process of estrangement in the UK (Blake, *et al*., 2015; Spacey and Sanderson, 2021; Matthews, *et al*., 2018). In a qualitative study of eight estranged students at the University of Lincoln, abuse or neglect by a family member was a key factor in participants' decisions to distance themselves from their parents (Spacey and Sanderson, 2021). These studies highlight a complex interaction between various influences, such as abuse and mismatched values that shape familial relationships and cause a permanent relationship breakdown.

The literature highlights the link between estrangement and protected characteristics. This is particularly the case with regards to sexuality and gender identity, with studies illustrating how parents' homophobia and transphobia can culminate in estrangement. A survey of 1700 students attending two universities in Sheffield in 2018 found LGBT students were twice as likely to have a distanced relationship with their family compared to all students, and were also twice as likely to report that family contact was a negative experience (Bland and Stevenson, 2018). Two small qualitative studies undertaken in Scotland with LGBTQ+ people (not students) shed light on the links between 'coming out' and being rejected by one's family, which led some LGBTQ+ participants to become homeless (Nugent, *et al*., 2020; Matthews, *et al*., 2018). Interviews with 20 LGBTQ+ people in Scotland illustrated how familial rejection of trans people could be linked to longer-term emotional abuse, and could lead to escalations in abuse which forced people to leave home (Matthews, *et al*., 2018).

The research also points towards other protected characteristics associated with estrangement such as religious belief, culture and ethnicity. For example, some studies highlight links between forced marriage and estrangement. However, as Taylor and Costa (2020a) note there is a gap with regards to how students' experiences of estrangement differ depending on their sexuality, gender identity and ethnicity (Spacey, 2019; Taylor and Costa, 2019a; Blake, 2017).

Wider social factors have also been found to play a role in influencing estrangement. Scotland's Commissioner for Fair Access cited social class as the main influence on inequality which, he said, impacted the likelihood of estrangement, particularly for young people from the most deprived backgrounds (2020). In contrast, survey research by Stand Alone (2014) found that estrangement permeated 'all types of families'. They found that 35% of those who earned at least £30,000 per year said they were estranged or knew someone who was estranged, compared to the UK average of 27%. They also found that the highest earners were more likely to know a family member who had cut contact, with 17% of the group reporting this, compared to the UK average of 12%. Another survey by Stand Alone of 1600 people reported that estrangement was more likely to occur in families where a breakdown in relationship was common (Blake, *et al*., 2015).

5. Prevalence of estranged students

Identifying estranged students has, up to now, been somewhat difficult as funding bodies and institutions have had to rely on students self-declaring upon entry. The estranged students interviewed as part of Costa's research in Scotland (2019) experienced stigma around their status and sometimes felt unable to identify with the 'narrow, and, contested' eligibility criteria. In other cases, they may not become estranged until they have already started their course, or may not identify as an estranged student due to low awareness of the term.

In a survey conducted by Ipsos Mori for Stand Alone (2014), 19% of respondents said they had been affected by family estrangement, with 8% of those from across the UK having cut ties with their family (12% in Scotland). This is considerably more than is suggested by data from funding bodies. Provisional data from the Student Loans Company (SLC) for 2021-22 found there were 8,435 estranged students enrolled at English HE providers that year, 292 in Wales and 104 in Northern Ireland (2022d). These publicly available data are published by the UK Government and are based on the number of individuals applying for student finance who indicated on their applications that they were estranged from their parents or are a care leaver.

Currently, no corresponding dataset exists for Scotland, although the Scottish Government is considering the data and statistics currently available on FE and HE students in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2020b). While no data were available pertaining to the number of estranged students in FE, Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) data published by Stand Alone (2020) estimates that there were 525 estranged students supported by SAAS on full-time HE courses at Scottish colleges and universities in 2019-20. Given the emotional and practical difficulties of evidencing family estrangement (Taylor and Costa, 2019b), it is likely numbers are higher. The SAAS data show higher proportions of female students self-declared as estranged than male (315 compared with 230). They also show higher proportions of self-declared estranged students came from the 40% most deprived postcode areas (approximately three-quarters came from these areas).

Widening access and funding policy in Scotland has until recently tended to focus on neighbourhood deprivation, family income, and care experienced students. Indeed, it was only in 2016 that the concept of estrangement among Scottish students was first recognised (Taylor and Costa, 2019a). Estranged students are mentioned rarely in reports from Scotland's Commissioner for Fair Access, although a 2020 report notes that family estrangement can be seen as an additional driver of inequality, and is one of the characteristics which can 'compound the core disadvantage produced by socio-economic deprivation.'

Amid signs of an increased recognition of estrangement and its associated challenges, UCAS introduced a tick box in 2022, which allows students to declare themselves as estranged from their parental figures at the point of application. This aims to make student estrangement more visible to institutions and facilitate access to support (Mueller, 2022). SAAS has had a similar tick box since 2018, which estranged students can select to highlight their eligibility for alternative, and potentially higher levels of funding (Scottish Government, 2020b). Unlike the UCAS declaration, however, this does not link to a students' institution; instead relying on the student to self-declare a second time to their college or university.

6. Estranged students funding policies in the UK

The amount of state support available to estranged students in FE and HE varies depending on which of the four UK nations they are domiciled in. This section provides an overview of the funding available to students in each nation, focusing on the support available in Scotland.

6.1 Scotland

Widening access and funding policy in Scotland has until recently tended to focus on neighbourhood deprivation, family income, and care experienced students (Commissioner for Fair Access, 2020). Amid signs of a shift in policy focus, the Independent Review into Student Support in Scotland highlighted how estranged students are distinct to independent students, unable to draw upon family or the state as a corporate parent (Scottish Government, 2017). More widely, it called for student loans to be extended to FE students and for a minimum student income of £8,100. The Scottish Government committed to expand support packages for estranged students in its 2021 Manifesto (Scottish Government, 2021a). The Programme for Government 2021-22 (Scottish Government, 2021b) outlines a 'commitment that the total student support package reaches the equivalent of the Living Wage over the next three years, including for estranged students', and to 'explore the possibility of introducing guarantorship for estranged students to protect them from exploitation in the housing market'.

The funding available to estranged students differs depending on whether they are enrolled on an FE or HE course.

FE student funding

Those undertaking FE courses (Level 6 courses, National Certificates, General Scottish Vocational Qualifications, National Qualifications etc) access support directly from their college. This includes Educational Maintenance Allowance (if aged 16-19) and college bursaries. No loans are available for FE students. At the time of the research (2021-22), FE students were eligible for up to £4667.65 in FE bursaries split over 43 weeks, equivalent to £108.55 per week (SFC, 2021a). This increased to £4,859 for 2022-23. Estranged students are eligible for the maximum college bursary; however, the amount students receive may be linked to attendance as noted in the SFC's Fund Management and Audit Information document for 2021-22 (see SFC, 2021a). This states that 'colleges should use their discretion to determine what absences will be accepted and should take into account the student's wider circumstances' before reducing or stopping the payments of students who are not engaging in their studies. The only mention of estranged students in this document is in relation to providing documentary evidence.

Estranged students may also be entitled to funds through their college's discretionary fund. These funds are intended to:

> 'Provide financial help to students whose access to or continuation in, Further Education (FE) may be inhibited by financial considerations. OR Where students, for whatever reasons, including physical or other disabilities, face financial difficulties.' (SFC, 2021b)

SFC guidance identifies estranged students as a 'priority group' for discretionary funding. Some colleges use discretionary funds to 'top up' estranged students' bursaries, while others administer discretionary and hardship funds to students as and when they apply for it, often at times of crisis. Some support is means tested and institutions may vary in how they administer these funds. Estranged students may also be able to access funding towards their travel and study expenses through their college. Estranged student parents are also eligible to apply for Discretionary Childcare Funds. Depending on their circumstances, some students in FE may be eligible for Universal Credit. This would usually be provided in place of an FE bursary.

HE student funding

The Scottish Government pays tuition fees for eligible Scottish-domiciled HE students enrolled on HNCs, HNDs and degree courses at Scottish colleges and universities. Support for living costs is administered by Students Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) in the form of maintenance loans paid by the Student Loans Company (SLC) and non-repayable bursaries paid by SAAS. 'Young students' (aged under 25) are assessed on the basis of their parental income. Estranged students are assessed by SAAS as 'independent students' (the same as those who are aged over 25) and are not subject to any means testing.

In 2022-23, young and independent students from the lowest income groups, and care experienced students, will be entitled to a total support package of £8,100. The ratio of loan to bursary, however, varies. Young students (aged under 25 and supported by their parents) from the lowest income group (with a household income of less than £21,000) receive a £2,000 bursary. Where income is over £34,000, young students are not eligible for the Young Student Bursary (YSB) and would instead receive a living costs loan only. In comparison, estranged students who are currently assessed as Independent students are not means-tested, and would receive a maximum bursary of £1,000 and a maximum loan of £7,100 (SAAS, 2022b). Care experienced students are entitled to a non-repayable Care Experienced Bursary (CEB) of £8,100 with no loan. Further details can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: SAAS support available to Scots-domiciled HE students 2022-2023

	YSB			ISB			CESB
Household income	Bursary	Loan	Total	Bursary	Loan	Total	Bursary
£0 to £20,999	£2,000	£6,100	£8,100	£1,000	£7,100	£8,100	£8,100
£21,000 to £23,999	£1,125	£6,100	£7,225	£0	£7,100	£7,100	
£24,000 to £33,999	£500	£6,100	£6,600	£0	£6,600	£6,600	
£34,000 and above	£0	£5,100	£5,100	£0	£5,100	£5,100	

Note: Estranged students are not subject to means testing and receive the maximum ISB and loan available

As with FE students, estranged HE students can also access hardship or discretionary funding (including childcare costs) via their college or university, with institutions free to decide how they administer these funds. HE students are also eligible to apply for Disabled Student Allowance.

Student parents may be eligible for Discretionary Childcare Funds to assist with the costs of childminders, after school clubs, day care, sitter services and pre-school education. These are administered by colleges and universities. Students are eligible to apply for additional living cost grants depending on their circumstances such as: Lone Parents' Grant and Dependants' Grant.

Additional sources of funding

Additional to the support outlined above, estranged students may also be able to access financial support through a range of other sources, including institutional scholarships and those offered by charities and other organisations. The Robertson Trust offers a self-development programme of support that includes a bursary of up to £4,000 per year to help students overcome social and financial barriers to access HE. The programme lasts for the duration of the young person's degree and supports those from groups that are under-represented at university, including those who are estranged. As well as finance, they also provide mentoring, training and counselling to the students they support. The Unite Foundation offer scholarships to cover the costs of accommodation and bills to estranged students studying at five Scottish universities (Robert Gordon University, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh Napier University, University of Strathclyde and Glasgow Caledonian University). They keep in touch with students, offer opportunities for employment and allow students to stay in the accommodation the summer after they graduate.

6.2 The rest of the UK

As mentioned above, Student Finance England's definition of estrangement appears somewhat stricter than the definitions adopted by the SFC or SAAS. In 2016, government grants for students in England were removed and replaced by loans (BBC News, 2016) (see Table 2 for current maintenance loan provision. This is in addition to tuition fee loans). When applying for their loan from Student Finance England, estranged students are encouraged to complete the 'confirmation of estrangement form' which, if accepted, allows them to apply for student finance as an 'independent student'. Their means-tested maintenance loan is then based solely on their own income, rather than their parents', enabling them to potentially access the maximum loan amount (UCAS, 2022b).

Table 2: Maintenance loan support for undergraduates in England 2022-2023 (Student Finance England, 2022b)

Student's living arrangements	Maximum maintenance loan for 2022/23
Living with parents	£8,171
Studying in London and not living with parents	£12,667
Studying outside London and not living with parents	£9,706
Living and studying abroad for at least one term as part of their UK course	£11,116

In Wales, students are able to apply as an estranged student if they have 'not had any contact with either parent for over a year' (Student Finance Wales, 2022a). Welsh estranged students are entitled to a Welsh Government Learning Grant of £8,100 and a maintenance loan of £1,125 (Save the Student, 2022a). Those in Northern Ireland may receive a grant of up to £3,475 and a maximum maintenance loan of £4,840 (Save the Student, 2022b).

Financial help is also available to students in FE, although this is not specifically for those who are estranged: 16-18-year-olds in Wales and 16-19-year-olds in Northern Ireland can access the Education Maintenance Allowance, which provides students with £30 a week (UK Government, 2022c). Both nations also offer grants for over 19s in FE (Education Authority Northern Ireland, 2022). These schemes do not exist in England. Instead, there is a bursary fund on offer for 16-19-year-olds to contribute to transport and learning materials (UK Government, 2022a) and the option to take out an Advanced Learner Loan for over 19s to help with course costs (UK Government, 2022b).

7. Experiences of estrangement

This section considers students' experiences of estrangement as reported in the literature. It explores the impact of being estranged on finances, accommodation, attainment and progression and mental health.

7.1 Finance

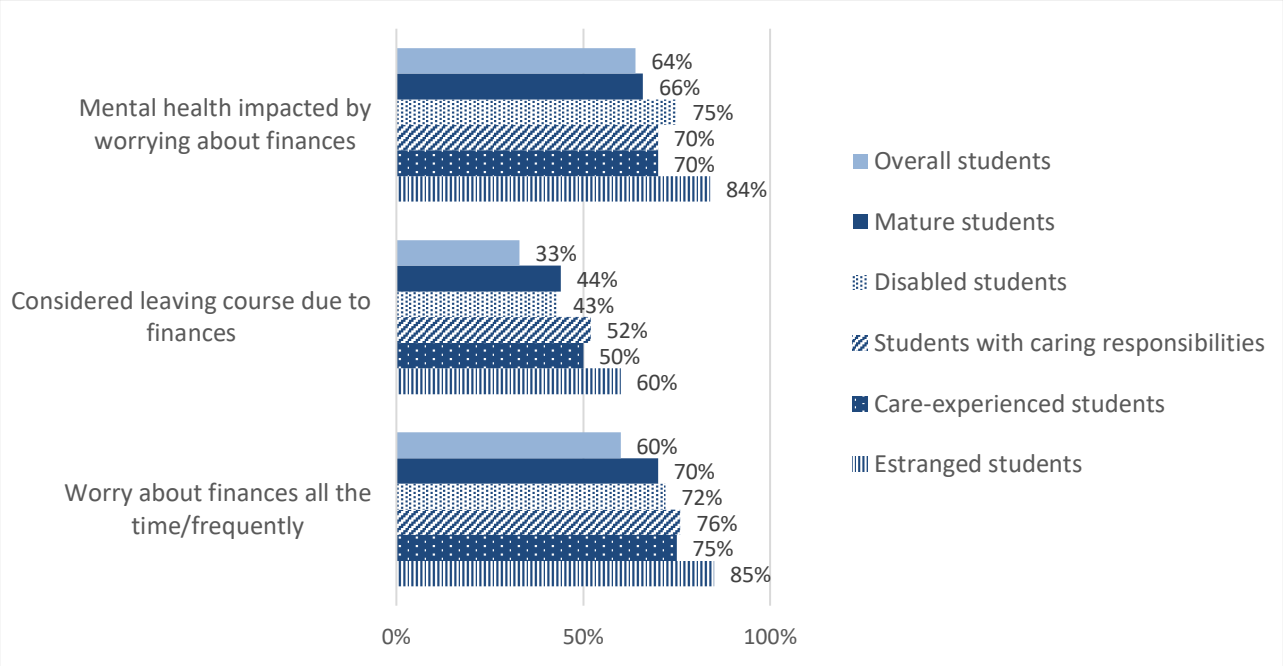
The financial impact of being estranged is a theme which cuts across the literature. Scottish and English research points to the precarious nature of estranged students' finances, cut off from the safety net of their families but without the support that care experienced students are able to draw upon (Minty and Vertigans, 2021). Estranged students responding to a Student Loans Company survey reported experiencing 'extreme sustained poverty' (Bland, 2018), while those interviewed as part of Scottish research at two universities experienced 'severe financial hardship' (Taylor and Costa, 2019a). For many estranged students, finance is a key barrier which causes significant amounts of anxiety, as a result of facing a 'near constant threat of precarity' (Costa, *et al*., 2020a).

Some of this hardship is linked to the difficulties estranged students face in evidencing their estrangement, with delays and inconsistencies with student funding often problematic (Stevenson, *et al*., 2020). Accessing the documents needed to prove estrangement can be upsetting (Taylor and Costa, 2019b) and time consuming, which can delay financial support (Bland, 2015; Casey, 2018; Scottish Government, 2017). Research by Bland and Blake (2020) highlighted the difficulties experienced by students seeking to prove their estrangement for the purposes of student finance and the impact this had on drop out. Their 2015 survey, conducted by the SLC in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, found that students reported high levels of stress and anxiety in relation to evidencing their estrangement, leading some to end their studies as a result. In some cases, the difficulty of evidencing estrangement led to delays in receiving loans and grants/bursaries, meaning estranged students experienced significant financial difficulties at the beginning of their courses.

Much of the research on estranged students has been undertaken in England, and has been conducted by or for Stand Alone. Their surveys show estranged students experience high levels of debt, credit card use and payday loans, and have to rely on the informal support of friends or extended family and institutional hardship funds (Bland, 2015). It is only in the past few years that the financial experiences of estranged students in Scotland, and student finances in general, have come under greater focus (Minty, 2021). Costa and Taylor's qualitative research (2020a; Taylor and Costa, 2019b) with students at two Scottish universities show the impact of the lack of funding over the summer holidays. Another qualitative study of students from disadvantaged groups at one Scottish university highlighted estranged students' debts accrued via homeless accommodation and council rent arrears (Minty and Vertigans, 2021).

More recently, NUS Scotland's survey of student poverty in 2022 found that estranged student respondents in Scotland were the most adversely affected by financial hardship compared to other groups of participating students. As Figure 1 below illustrates, estranged students responding to this survey reported the greatest levels of financial worry, were the most likely to consider leaving their course due to finances, and to report that their mental health had been impacted by worrying about finances.

Figure 1: Estranged student respondents' experiences of finance compared to other student groups, Source: NUS Scotland (2022) Broke report.



Recently, the financial challenges facing all students have become more prominent (Abdul, 2022). However, an NUS online survey of 3,417 students and apprentices across the UK found that although the cost of living crisis affects many students, it was having a disproportionate effect on estranged students, disabled students and student parents/carers. This non-representative survey reported that between January and June 2022, students' use of food banks doubled, with estranged students one of the groups more likely to have used food banks and more likely to have reduced their food consumption (NUS, 2022).

Literature from both Scotland and the rest of the UK highlights the relationship between financial insecurity and the threat of homelessness (Costa, *et al*., 2020a). The high cost of student accommodation is a key challenge for estranged students, with funding from student loans and/or bursaries/grants often just covering rent, leaving little for the rest of their outgoings (Bland, 2018; NUS Scotland, 2022). Two thirds of estranged students surveyed in England, Wales and Northern Ireland reported that their student finance package was insufficient to cover living costs (66% of estranged students, 45% of care leavers, and 53% of all respondents) (Bland, 2015). Most of the literature relating to estrangement and finance focuses on the experiences of HE students. Scottish Government research (2019) is

unusual in that it explored the perspectives of FE students on student funding, based on focus groups and an online survey. This found that many FE students were unable to meet their essential living costs.

Limited funding can leave many estranged students having to undertake large amounts of paid work during term-time to cover essential expenses like bills and food (Bland, 2018), which may have a detrimental impact on students' engagement with their studies (Howieson and Minty, 2019). Estranged students often related their financial struggles to summer accommodation which they had to self-fund. Some explained they took out short-term loans to do this which left them with further debt (Bland, 2018) . Qualitative and mixed methods studies undertaken in both Scotland and England in 2020 during and immediately after the first lockdown found the pandemic reduced part-time job opportunities (Scottish Government, 2020a; Minty and Vertigans, 2021) and increased student isolation (Blake, *et al*., 2020).

In recognition of this, institutions have increased discretionary funding, with many providing Covid hardship funding to help students who are struggling (Abdul, 2022). Responses from 95 UK universities to a recent Freedom of Information request by BBC News found that hardship funding for universities doubled between 2019/20 and 2020/21 (Shearing, 2022). It also reported that during that time, the number of students applying for hardship funds has increased, meaning that the average award per student has reduced. Discretionary and hardship funding have been shown to be a key source of financial support for estranged university students in times of crisis or financial emergencies (Minty and Vertigans, 2021). However, a longitudinal comparative case study of estranged students in two UK universities found students expressed anxieties around the fact this support is not guaranteed each year (Key, 2019). NUS Scotland's survey reported that discretionary funding is 'still failing to get to students who need it' (NUS Scotland, 2022). It found that one-fifth of those who applied for funding did not receive it, while half said they had received money but not as much as they needed.

7.2 Accommodation

Closely linked to finances, challenges relating to accommodation have been highlighted across the literature as an issue which disproportionately affects estranged students. Several surveys of students have found high rates of homelessness among estranged students in both England and Scotland. A survey of estranged students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland found that more than 30% of students had registered as homeless or had considered doing so before their course began (Bland, 2015). In Scotland, a third of estranged students responding to a survey by NUS Scotland had experienced homelessness, compared with 12% of students overall and 29% of care-experienced students (NUS Scotland, 2022). English, Welsh and Northern Irish estranged students reported having stayed in hostels, shelters or Bed and Breakfast accommodation, while others stayed with friends or partners, or couch surfed (Bland, 2018). Qualitative research with estranged and care experienced students at a Scottish

university highlighted the challenges these students faced trying to study whilst living in homeless accommodation, and the strain this placed on their mental health (Minty and Vertigans, 2021).

Once at university or college, estranged students faced further challenges in securing and retaining accommodation. Several studies have highlighted that estranged students struggle to afford the high rents of university and private accommodation without family support (Costa, 2019; Key, 2019; Bland, 2018). Estranged students at university in both Scotland and the rest of the UK who received the maximum student loan still faced difficulties with covering their rent, according to several studies (Costa, *et al*., 2020a; Key, 2019; Bland, 2018). A survey in England, Wales and Northern Ireland indicated that estranged students were more worried than students overall about affording accommodation (Bland and Shaw, 2015). In NUS Scotland's 2022 survey, estranged student respondents were most likely to report being unable to pay their rent in full (46% of estranged students, 26% of all students) (NUS Scotland, 2022). It is recommended that students work around 10-15 hours of paid work per week (Student Information Scotland). However, evidence submitted by student representative organisations to a Scottish Government scoping study on Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) expressed concern that estranged students had to work 'excessive hours' in order to cover their rent (Scottish Government, 2022).

Term-time leases have been found to cause housing insecurity for estranged students unable to return to their parents' homes during university holidays. Casey highlighted that some students were made homeless or had to turn to couch surfing as a result of having to vacate their student housing during the holidays (Casey, 2018). For this reason, estranged students showed a preference for private accommodation over university housing as it was more likely to offer year-round leases in a survey of English, Welsh and Northern Irish students (Bland, 2018). While some student accommodation providers did provide 365-day contracts, this was not a universal service across all institutions and providers, and rent rates tended to be higher than in alternative private housing (Scottish Government, 2022; Matthews, *et al*., 2018; Costa, 2019).

The difficulties of accessing a guarantor for accommodation costs as an estranged student have been underexplored in the literature. Bland highlighted that university accommodation often required students to provide a guarantor to stay in halls of residence or other student accommodation (Bland, 2018). Several studies have reported that some estranged students have been forced to pay many months of rent in advance as a result of being unable to find a guarantor (Casey, 2018; Spacey, 2019). Evidence submitted to a Scottish Government's scoping study on PBSA suggested that this could be challenging for many students (Scottish Government, 2022). Recommendations for dealing with this issue have included guarantor-free accommodation at universities and national guarantorship schemes at educational institutions (Bland, 2018). Five institutions in Scotland already provide rent guarantor schemes but this is not consistent across all accommodation providers.

Another problem facing estranged students in terms of accommodation was isolation. Research has highlighted that estranged students experienced isolation from their peers when their flatmates went home during the holidays, or when they opted for private accommodation over university housing (Bland, 2018; Spacey, 2019). Estranged students were found to be more likely than average to want a buddy or mentoring system in their student accommodation (Bland and Shaw, 2015). However, despite the difficulties outlined above, estranged students from across the UK reported in a qualitative study that privately renting accommodation while at university offered a space of sanctuary and agency that they had missed out on at home (Spacey and Sanderson, 2021).

7.3 Mental health

Poor mental health is an issue which has increasingly been found to be a challenge faced by students, with increasing levels of anxiety and depression reported among young people. For example, the number of HE students in England reporting they had a mental health condition doubled between 2014/15 and 2018/19 (House of Commons Library, 2021). In a survey of 15,000 students in Scotland undertaken by the Mental Health Foundation in 2021, with funding from the Robertson Trust (Mental Health Foundation, 2022), 74% of respondents reported low well-being (74%), while more than a third (36%) reported either moderately severe or severe symptoms of depression. The loneliness and isolation caused by Covid-19 lockdowns have exacerbated this, with half of students surveyed by NUS reporting that their mental health was worse than before the pandemic (NUS, 2020; Hall, 2022). Research shows that these feelings are magnified for estranged students, given that experiences of estrangement are often linked to abuse (physical, sexual and emotional) and neglect (Oloyede, *et al*., 2020). More broadly, the experience of cutting oneself off from parents, or being cut off from one's family, can be highly traumatic, especially when combined with financial insecurity and fears of homelessness (Costa, *et al*., 2020a).

Family-oriented occasions such as moving-in day and holidays were found to spark feelings of anxiety and grief for estranged students interviewed at an English post-92 university (Spacey, 2019). Isolation was also found to be a challenge for estranged students remaining in student accommodation during holidays and over lockdowns caused by the Covid-19 pandemic (Scottish Government, 2020). The Scottish Government's research into the experiences of students during the pandemic found that estranged students, care-experienced and international students, were particularly exposed to mental health problems during the pandemic as staying in university halls or flats during lockdown created an 'intense environment'. A recent survey by NUS Scotland highlighted that the impact of financial worries on mental health disproportionately affects estranged students: 84% of estranged student respondents said that worrying about finances had impacted their mental health compared with 64% of all students surveyed (NUS Scotland, 2022).

The literature points to a clear need for mental health support among estranged students. A survey by Stand Alone (2015) found that 78% of people across the UK who were estranged had sought help from a counsellor or therapist, while a small-scale qualitative study of estranged students at an English university found most had accessed university counselling services (Spacey and Sanderson, 2021). A survey of students in Scotland found estranged students were one of the groups who were more likely to access mental health support (Oloyede, *et al*., 2020). Research for Stand Alone found that 88% of estranged students in the UK who accessed counselling found it helpful (Blake, *et al*., 2015), while estranged people who took part in a UK-wide survey reported that they found counselling helpful as it allowed them to move forward with their lives and develop a deeper understanding of their family relationships (Blake, *et al*., 2020). However, this study also highlighted challenges in accessing counselling, with respondents reporting that therapists lacked knowledge of estrangement or family abuse, pushed them to forgive their family member, and focused on the past rather than helping them move forward.

In qualitative and mixed methods studies undertaken with estranged students, participants complained of long waiting times for institutional counselling sessions, and too few sessions offered to be able to deal with complex trauma. Students also struggled to identify the mental health support that was available (Stevenson, *et al*., 2020). There was also variation in the level of support available to students across the higher education sector, leading some estranged students to pay for counselling instead (Spacey and Sanderson, 2021).

The literature also highlights the role of other types of support accessed by estranged students in lieu of parents. A mixed methods study of estranged students and HE staff in England and Scotland identified the importance of a system of personal support for estranged students who had considered withdrawing from their studies (Stevenson, *et al*., 2020), while the use of friends as a surrogate family support network is highlighted elsewhere as a form of emotional support (Spacey, 2019). That being said, Stand Alone found that only 42% of estranged people had told their close friends all the details of their estrangement, while half had told them something of their estrangement (Blake, *et al*., 2015). Stigma, shame and embarrassment was a key factor for survey respondents – something which is also highlighted in qualitative interviews with estranged students as informing their reluctance to talk of their experiences (Costa, 2019).

7.4 Attainment, transitions, student outcomes, progression and graduation

UK literature highlights the impact of estrangement on students' learning, namely: school, FE and HE attainment; access and transitions between school, FE and HE; and progression once studying at college or university can be affected.

Although the Scottish Government collects data on care experienced school attainment, data on the attainment of estranged young people are not routinely

collected. This makes it difficult to measure the impact of estrangement on attainment; however, research suggests that estranged students may enter FE and HE later in life. A survey conducted for the Unite Foundation (Bland and Shaw, 2015) found that higher proportions of 21-24 year old HE students were estranged (52% versus 34% of all students), suggesting that estranged students are less likely to enter HE immediately after school or FE. Interviews with estranged students at a Scottish post-92 university support this (Minty and Vertigans, 2021). Participants were more likely to have entered via college routes rather than directly from school, citing the detrimental impact of their estrangement on their attainment. Estranged students interviewed as part of this study who had obtained an HNC/HND at college were reluctant to articulate (see SFC, 2022b) into the second or third year of a degree programme at university, preferring instead to enter first year. Although this had implications for their overall student debt, it was viewed as a less risky option, allowing them time to adjust to the transition.

Literature has shown that estranged students were more likely than all students were overall to withdraw from their course. Data from the Office for Students (2020) found that estranged students were more likely to drop out, while a survey for Stand Alone administered by the Student Loans Company found that 14% said they had suspended or deferred their current course, while a further 27% said they had considered deferring (Bland, 2015).

Explanations for the lower continuation rates for estranged students are complex. Reasons for withdrawal from courses vary, with qualitative studies (Stevenson, *et al*., 2020; Spacey and Sanderson, 2021) reporting financial issues, low academic attainment, isolation from peers, loss of personal support networks and accommodation issues as contributing factors in estranged student drop out in the UK. In a survey of estranged students, financial stress was the main reason for withdrawing, followed by health and wellbeing (Bland, 2015), while further analysis found that a culmination of several of these factors intersected to result in estranged students dropping out (Bland, 2018) .

Research also points to different degree outcomes for those who complete their course, with estranged students being less likely to achieve a First Class degree or a 2:1 than their non-estranged peers (Office for Students, 2020). A survey conducted by Stand Alone of 85 students who were about to graduate highlighted the additional challenges faced by estranged students after graduation. Respondents reported having to juggle looking for jobs with financial and housing issues without the support of universities, employers, the government, or family. This led estranged students to focus on meeting financial and housing needs rather than pursuing career goals or postgraduate education (Rouncefield-Swales and Bland, 2019).

7.5 Reframing estrangement

Despite the challenges faced by estranged students, studies have shown that some estranged students frame their family breakdown in an emancipatory light. In an

online survey of estranged people, 80% of people who had experienced estrangement said they associated it with positive feelings of freedom and independence (Blake, *et al*., 2015). Similarly, students viewed the independence gained from their estrangement as advantageous (Rouncefield-Swales and Bland, 2019), while FE and HE students interviewed in Scotland tended to reject the label of estrangement, preferring to highlight their sense of independence in a positive light (Costa, *et al*., 2020b). Other Scottish research with university students highlighted high levels of resilience, motivation and a strong desire to succeed in order to prove people wrong among estranged and care experienced interviewees (Minty and Vertigans, 2021). Similar themes of estranged students having a strong work ethic, empathy and motivation to improve their lives have also been found in research with estranged students in England (Rouncefield-Swales and Bland, 2019). However, despite the prevalence of this positive reframing of estrangement in the eyes of some estranged students, most existing research has explored more negative discourses around the issue (Costa, *et al*., 2020b).

8. Conclusions

This review has found, like other research, that student estrangement is an under-researched area. The literature relating specifically to estranged students in the UK is fairly brief, and much of it has been carried out by a small number of researchers undertaking work for Stand Alone. The majority of studies are quantitative in nature. Although several qualitative studies of students have been undertaken in Scotland and England, these have tended to focus on a small number of students in one or two specific institutions. No qualitative studies were found which include students from a wide range of colleges or universities. This is in contrast to the research which this literature review informed where estranged students came from multiple institutions and studied both FE and HE courses.

The experiences of estrangement in Scotland are particularly under-represented, with the literature consisting mainly of Taylor and Costa's qualitative study of estranged students. There are no large-scale quantitative studies of estranged students in Scotland, although some Scottish students are included in a small number of surveys undertaken for Stand Alone.

A key gap is the experiences of estranged students in FE. While some policy work on funding has been undertaken with this group by the Scottish Government, this is unusual in a body of work where the experiences of estranged FE students remain invisible. The research which accompanies this literature review goes some way to inform our understanding of the experiences of FE students who are estranged from their parents, but further work in this area would be welcome.

The institutional perspective is largely absent from the literature, which focuses mainly on the experiences of estranged students themselves, rather than the views of staff who support them or wider stakeholders. Likewise, there is no study which explores the level of support available in Scottish institutions to estranged students.

This research has provided some initial insights from which further research could build on.

The final gap in the literature is linked to this, and relates to the policy perspective. There is much in the literature exploring issues around the experiences of estranged students in terms of identity, financial challenges, homelessness etc., but less relating to how government responds to the needs of estranged students, and how support from student funding impacts on the lives of students.

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