

Research to understand the experiences of estranged students in further and higher education in Scotland



CHILDREN, EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Authors

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Executive summary

Introduction and methodology

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 report draws out learning from the research findings to inform future policy and improve the provision of support for estranged students.

The Scottish Government has committed to “improve the support available to estranged students - those without parental financial support - with a package of support equivalent to the Living Wage”. It has also committed to “explore whether a programme of guarantorship for estranged students, who are disproportionately vulnerable to exploitation within the housing market, can be created in partnership with colleges and universities”.

The study consisted of: a rapid review of the literature; online/telephone depth interviews with 25 estranged students and 6 stakeholders; and focus groups with 7 college and 5 university named contacts. Forty-three people participated in the research.

Reasons and contexts of estrangement

- Key reasons given by students for estrangement from their parents/guardians were: toxic relationships with biological/step parents; students acting as carers to parents and/or siblings; emotional, physical, and sexual abuse; cultural conflicts and clashes of values such as religion, forced marriage, or parents not accepting their sexuality/gender identity. These findings are consistent with existing literature on estrangement. The research highlights the effects of intersectionality on estranged students.
- Some students were not familiar with the term ‘estrangement’ and awareness tended to come from interacting with SAAS or college and university staff.
- Often, HE students had declared their estrangement to SAAS but not to their college/university. Reasons for this delay in declaration included a reluctance to self-declare due to feelings of embarrassment, pride or shame, as well as a lack of awareness of the additional support offered by colleges and universities to estranged students. The process of evidencing estrangement was perceived to be stressful and challenging for students.
- FE and HE students who did declare to their institution tended to do so at points of crisis, often a year or two into their studies.

Impacts of estrangement on finance

- The fear of not having enough money to live off was acute and impacted on estranged students’ already fragile mental health and their studies.

- Significant financial hardship was common among the students who reported using food banks, going without food, and getting into debt.
- Current levels of funding for estranged students were deemed insufficient (by participating students, named contacts and stakeholders) to cover the essentials of daily living, let alone the wider 'student experience'.
- The high cost of accommodation meant the majority of student funding was used by estranged students for rent, with little left for other essentials.
- Some HE estranged students received lower levels of SAAS funding than they were potentially eligible for as a result of late self-declarations, becoming estranged after applying to SAAS, or lacking awareness of SAAS funding for estranged students.
- Students expressed concern about student loan debt, the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and the need to support dependents.
- Paid work was considered a necessity by the majority of interviewees, with some working very long hours, which impacted on their academic performance.
- Several FE students said their college bursaries had been reduced due to poor attendance related to the impacts of being estranged on mental health or due to taking on additional paid work.
- Discretionary/hardship funding was a key source of income, but awareness of this funding was sometimes low.
- Estranged students struggled with the lack of student finance over the summer.
- There was strong support amongst all participant types for funding to be brought in line with the Care Experienced Students Bursary, but there was concern that this would still not meet basic needs.

Impact of estrangement on accommodation

- It was common for students to have experienced periods of homelessness or to have felt at risk of becoming homeless. Worries about this happening again in the future were pervasive. Some students had 'couch-surfed' for long periods, relying on extended family, friends or family of friends. Others had lived in emergency hostels and homeless accommodation.
- Students reported their accommodation options were heavily limited by the high cost of student rents, particularly halls of residence and privately rented accommodation.
- Estranged students raised concerns about the quality of accommodation they could afford, with some living in accommodation where they felt unsafe or cramped. As a result, some students had moved frequently, which impacted negatively on their studies and mental health.
- Estranged students found it difficult to access a rent guarantor, which further limited their accommodation options. Some relied on family or friends' parents to act as guarantors, while others paid large deposits or non-guarantor payments.

- Awareness of existing guarantor schemes was low. Those who were aware highlighted limitations around them tending not to include private and joint tenancies, caps on the number of students who could access them, and caps on the level of monthly rents covered. Students and stakeholders were overwhelmingly supportive of a national guarantorship scheme.

Impact of estrangement on educational transitions, attainment and progression

- Where estrangement happened while still at school, this was said to impact significantly on students' attainment. This affected FE and HE access with some missing out on their preferred course or institution, while others went to college to obtain missed qualifications.
- Some HNC/HND students expressed a reluctance to articulate, preferring to enter first year of degree programmes. In some cases, this led to additional years' learning, which increased student loan debt.
- The financial and emotional impacts of estrangement interfered with students' ability to focus on coursework and their grades. This led students to interrupt their studies through drop out, repeated trimesters/years, course changes and the necessity for additional time to complete assignments.
- Some students reported they felt unsupported by teaching staff who did not understand the challenges faced by estranged students. Others were able to draw on support systems of partners, extended family and friends, as well as college and university staff to help them achieve academically and provide emotional support. Those without the support of friends and family found it harder to navigate systems and felt more isolated.
- Graduation was viewed with anxiety by some estranged students due to the end of student funding and how they would afford necessities.

Impact on estrangement on health and wellbeing

- Many students had long-lasting and complex mental health issues as a result of trauma resulting from their estrangement. Anxiety, depression, eating disorders, self-harm, and suicidal ideation and behaviour were common among the participants. Poor mental health was exacerbated by stress relating to finances and accommodation.
- Estrangement also led to feelings of loneliness, isolation and stigma and resulted in low confidence and self-esteem, as well as difficulties in forming relationships with other students and staff.
- While the negative mental health impact of being estranged predominated, students also highlighted the positives of freedom through emancipation, escaping abusive relationships and being able to be themselves.
- Students' experiences of accessing support for mental health and wellbeing varied. Some were unaware their institution offered counselling. Others were aware, with some successfully accessing support and finding it helpful. However, others reported long waiting lists or that their needs had been considered too complex. Some paid privately to access appropriate therapy.

- The support of classmates, friends, partners and extended family were considered vital to cope with the many emotional impacts of estrangement, but not all students were able to access this type of support.

Institutional responses to estrangement

- There was evidence of estranged students receiving support through their institution to assist them with finances, accommodation, academic studies and mental health. Overall, those who received support found it helpful.
- Students experienced barriers in accessing support. A lack of awareness of support offered to estranged students in colleges and universities, as well as a general reluctance to self-declare as estranged meant disclosures often came late, delaying students' ability to access support.
- When students did declare to their institution, this was often to a member of teaching staff rather than a named contact, and teaching staff rarely referred students to a named contact. Students who had been supported by named contacts were highly positive, yet awareness of named contacts was low amongst interviewees.
- Named contacts and stakeholders expressed concern at the degree of variation between colleges and universities in how they distributed discretionary funding.
- Mental health support at colleges and universities was thought to be lacking and focused on educational attainment rather than addressing the causes of the mental health challenges or trauma.

Improving support for estranged students

- Support is needed for students to feel able to declare their estrangement (to both SAAS and their university/college) at the earliest opportunity to enable them to access the appropriate financial and mental health support.
- Proactive promotion of the support available to estranged students through colleges, universities and SAAS would help raise awareness of estrangement to encourage earlier self-declaration, help students access support and improve understanding among FE and HE staff.
- Financial support available to estranged students should be more proactively promoted to estranged students to further encourage early self-declaration.
- Participants called for mental health support suitable for addressing the issues faced by students (for example, trauma, self-harm and/or suicidal ideation) to be more widely available and more actively promoted.
- There was wide support for the provision of a national guarantorship system for estranged students which would cover any type of accommodation or provision of more affordable student accommodation.
- Students, named contacts and stakeholders called for year-round funding based on bursaries rather than loans, to overcome the financially precarious lives of estranged students.

1. Introduction

1.1. Rationale for the research

The Scottish Government has committed to “improve the support available to estranged students – those without parental financial support – with a package of support equivalent to the Living Wage”. It has also committed to explore whether a programme of guarantorship might be created in partnership with colleges and universities ([Scottish Government, 2021](#)). To help contextualise the research, this section provides a brief summary of the key findings from the UK literature on student estrangement. A more detailed review of the literature is published separately to this document.

In Scotland, definitions of estrangement vary by funding provider. In this study, estranged students were defined as those without care experience who had no contact with their parents/legal guardians/carers as a result of a permanent breakdown in their relationship.

Research shows that estranged students are more likely to be female, and estrangement tends to occur during secondary school or further education (FE) ([Bland, 2015](#)). Physical and emotional abuse, mismatched expectations about family roles and relationships, and a clash of personalities and values have been identified as key causes of estrangement ([Bland, et al., 2015](#)), as have family rejection among LGBTQI+ students, and issues around divorce and forced marriage ([Blake, 2017](#)).

Scottish and English research points to the precarious finances of students cut off from the safety net of their families. Estranged students participating in qualitative and quantitative studies undertaken in Scotland and England reported how stressful and upsetting providing evidence of their estrangement could be ([Taylor and Costa, 2019b](#)). It could also be time consuming, which was found to delay any financial support available ([Bland, 2015](#); [Scottish Government, 2017](#)). Forced to rely on the informal support of friends or extended family and institutional hardship funds, but with no recourse to the additional support offered to those with care experience ([Minty and Vertigans, 2021](#)), estranged students have been found to experience high levels of debt, credit card use and payday loans ([Bland, 2015](#)). In a 2022 survey of Scottish students conducted by NUS Scotland, 84% of estranged student respondents said their mental health had been impacted by worrying about money (versus 64% of all student respondents) ([NUS Scotland, 2022](#)).

Various studies have shown estranged students are more likely to be affected by homelessness, especially during holidays ([Bland and Shaw, 2015](#); [Taylor and Costa, 2019a](#); [Minty and Vertigans, 2021](#)). In 2022, 26% of estranged students in Scotland responding to NUS Scotland’s survey had experienced this (versus 10% of all students responding) ([NUS Scotland, 2022](#)). A survey of UK estranged students across the UK for Stand Alone in 2015 found that it can be difficult for estranged students to obtain private rental agreements without a guarantor ([Bland and Shaw, 2015](#)). Part-time work is often essential to cover the high cost of student

accommodation which may have a detrimental impact on students' engagement with their studies ([Howieson and Minty, 2019](#)). The literature highlights the impact of the pandemic in reducing part-time job opportunities for students ([Scottish Government, 2020](#); [Minty and Vertigans, 2021](#)) and increasing estranged students' isolation ([Blake, et al., 2020](#)). This potentially exacerbates the 'near constant threat of precarity' faced by estranged students ([Costa, et al., 2020](#)) who experience high levels of exclusion and stigma ([Bland and Shaw, 2015](#); [Taylor and Costa, 2019b](#)).

Estrangement has been found to impact not just FE/HE access, but transitions from school to FE, between FE and HE, and beyond. Estranged students are three times more likely to drop out of university than the average student. They are also less likely to be integrated into the student community ([Bland, 2015](#)), and less likely to achieve at least a 2:1 degree ([Office for Students, 2020](#)). Scottish students reported how estrangement impacted on their sense of belonging to an institution, affected their ability to settle into their course academically and socially, and meant they missed out on student life ([Taylor and Costa, 2019b](#); [Minty and Vertigans, 2021](#); [Bland, 2015](#)).

1.2. Policy background

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 2017 Independent Review into Student Support in Scotland highlighted how estranged students are distinct to 'independent students' as they are unable to draw upon family or the state as a corporate parent ([Scottish Government, 2017](#)). It called for student loans to be extended to FE students and for a minimum student income of £8100 for all.

It is difficult to know precisely how many estranged students there are in Scotland. Initial data published by the SFC for 2020-21 is available in the Report on Widening Access ([SFC, 2022b](#), publication's background tables). Given the emotional and practical difficulties of evidencing family estrangement, it is likely numbers are higher ([Taylor and Costa, 2019b](#)). Data collection on numbers of estranged students in college and university is a new development and numbers should be treated with caution until the collections are established.

The level of funding estranged students receive depends on whether they are in FE or HE. Those studying higher education (HE) courses (degrees, Higher National Certificates/Diplomas) in university/college are funded centrally through Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS). These students are eligible for different levels of maintenance loans and bursaries depending on whether they are assessed as 'young students' (aged under 25) on the basis of their parent's, parent's (civil) partner (that live with them), or legal guardian's income, or 'independent students' where household income is assessed as the combined income of you and your husband, wife or (civil) partner (the same as those aged over 25) (Table 1). Students who register as estranged with SAAS can access the maximum independent student package (current rate £8,100) and are not subject to any

means-testing. Students with experience of care are entitled to the Care Experienced Student Bursary (CESB).

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

Household income	YSB			ISB			CESB Bursary
	Bursary	Loan	Total	Bursary	Loan	Total	
£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.

FE students (undertaking National Certificates, General Scottish Vocational Qualifications, National Qualifications) access support directly via their college. This includes Educational Maintenance Allowance (if aged 16-19) and college bursaries. At the time of the research (2021-22), FE students were eligible for up to £4667.65 split over 43 weeks ([SFC, 2021a](#)). This increased to £4,859 for 2022-23. In some cases, students may also qualify for Universal Credit.

Estranged students can also access hardship or discretionary funding via their college/university ([SFC, 2021b](#); [SFC, 2022a](#)). Student parents may be eligible for Childcare Funds to assist with the costs of childminders, after school clubs, daycare, sitter services and pre-school education.

Fifteen universities and 11 colleges in Scotland have taken the Stand Alone Pledge to support estranged students ([Stand Alone, 2022](#)) (see Appendix 1). Institutions may offer additional support to estranged students, such as: guaranteed accommodation for 52 weeks a year; guarantorships for rental agreements; named contacts providing one-to-one support; institutional bursaries or scholarships for estranged students; and targeted academic and pastoral support.

2. Methodology

2.1. Research aims and objectives

The overall aim of the research was to understand more about the experiences of, and available evidence on, estranged students in Scottish further education (FE) and higher education (HE) institutions. The research aligns with the Scottish Government's 2021 manifesto commitment to improve the support available to estranged students. The invitation to tender outlined a number of research aims and questions which are outlined below:

Aim 1: Understand more about the available published literature on estrangement and estranged students - what it tells us and what we may learn from it

- What does the available published evidence on estrangement tell us and what may we learn from it?
- Are there any good practice examples of supporting students who are estranged in Scotland and the rest of the UK which could be learned from? What are the key areas of learning from these?
- What are the key learning points that can be drawn from this research to inform the development/delivery of future policy?

Aim 2: Understand more about the contexts of estrangement for students engaging with FE and HE in Scotland

- How can we understand more about the reasons for, and contexts of, estrangement that estranged students experience when engaging with colleges and universities in Scotland?
- How do these contexts (including age, equalities and deprivation) shape the experiences of estranged students studying in FE and HE in Scotland?
- How do these contexts shape transitions? For example, experiences of transitioning into FE and HE and/or between FE and HE, and potential insights of current students on their future transition from FE and HE following the completion of their studies/graduation?

Aim 3: Understand more about the insights and experiences of estranged students engaging with colleges and universities in Scotland, including any barriers/issues faced

- What can we learn from the insights and experiences of estranged students and stakeholders working with them about their engagements and interactions with FE and HE in Scotland?
- What has worked well/less well? Where are the barriers?

Aim 4: Understand more about possible solutions

- What could be done to overcome barriers experienced by estranged students in both an FE and HE context? What learning may be shared?
- What types of approach/support do estranged students and stakeholders engaging with them think could make a difference to estranged students in both a FE and HE context, and their student experiences?
- What more could institutions do to offer support to estranged students, for example, in relation to student finance, accommodation and pastoral support?
- The Manifesto Commitment seeks to improve the support available to estranged students, with a package of support equivalent to the Living Wage. What would be the potential impact of this, what do estranged students and stakeholders perceive to be key considerations/priorities within this?

2.2. Research ethics

An application was submitted to NatCen Research Ethics Committee (REC) in late March 2022, and ethical approval was granted in early April 2022.

2.3. Research design and sampling

To address the research aims and questions, ScotCen conducted a study consisting of a rapid review of literature and qualitative research.

2.3.1. Review of literature

To ensure the research built on existing evidence, a rapid review of literature of published evidence on contexts and experiences of estrangement in FE and HE in the UK was conducted. This included reviewing academic journals, grey literature and research undertaken by specialist organisations. Researchers also reviewed publicly available policy documents and strategies to contextualise institutional approaches to estranged students. This involved searching webpages of FE/HE institutions in Scotland/UK. The review aimed to identify gaps in the literature, identify areas of best practice and inform the selection of stakeholders and institutions invited to take part in the fieldwork. The review also influenced the content of the research tools.

2.3.2. Qualitative research

To meet the research aims and fully understand contexts of estrangement and students' experiences of them, qualitative methodologies were implemented. These included telephone/online depth interviews with stakeholders and estranged students, and online focus groups with college and university staff. All qualitative interviews and focus groups took place between 9th May and 1st June 2022.

Estranged student sampling

To ensure a diverse range of experiences of estrangement were captured by the research, a purposive sampling approach was used. A number of sampling criteria were identified for selecting estranged students for interview. The main sampling criteria included:

- Level of course (full-time FE courses, HNC/Ds and university-based degrees), and
- Institution type and location (large city college/ancient university, town college/pre-92 university, rural college/post-92 university).

In addition, estranged students were selected to include diversity in terms of: age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, SIMD, disability and caring responsibilities.

Stakeholder sampling

Stakeholders were selected to ensure that a range of perspectives were included. A long-list of relevant stakeholders was identified in consultation with the RAG. This included a mixture of policy experts and representatives from relevant third sector organisations.

College and university staff sampling

To capture the views and experiences of FE and HE staff, two focus groups with named contacts responsible for assisting estranged students were conducted, one with college staff and the other with university staff. Universities were selected to ensure that a range of institutions were included in the research, including 'ancients', pre- and post-92 universities. Colleges were selected to ensure they represented both rural and urban settings, and varied in size. The selection of institutions was also based on findings from the review of institutional policies and in consultation with the Research Advisory Group (RAG). Each focus group included 5-8 participants to ensure 10-16 different institutions were included in the research.

2.4. Recruitment

2.4.1. Estranged students

Estranged students were invited to participate in the research using a number of recruitment strategies. In consultation with the RAG, ScotCen drafted an invitation to participate in the research to be sent to estranged students by email from Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) and a number of colleges. The invitation email was sent to 17 colleges and eight replied to say that the invitation had been shared with students.

The invitation to participate in the research included a summary of the research and contact details for the ScotCen research team. This enabled those wishing to participate in the research to express their interest with the research team directly. Once an individual expressed interest, a member of the research team made

contact via email to share an information sheet and privacy notice which outlined further details about the research. The email also included a link to a short online screening questionnaire. Individuals were given the option to complete the screening questions by telephone with a member of the ScotCen research team. Screening questions asked about an individual's age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, SIMD, institution name and level of course. Individuals were also asked about any accessibility needs for participating in an interview. Individuals who had completed screening questions were selected for interview based on the sampling criteria agreed at project inception and invited to choose a date and time for interview.

2.4.2. Stakeholders

ScotCen selected up to six individuals from the long list of stakeholders and invited them to participate in an interview, thus ensuring the anonymity of participants. Participants were selected to represent a broad range of views. An invitation to participate in the research was sent via email and included a research information sheet and privacy notice. Stakeholders interested in participating in the research replied directly to ScotCen to arrange a suitable time and date for the interview.

2.4.3. College and university named contacts

ScotCen selected named contacts from nine universities and eight colleges to invite to participate in a focus group. Universities and colleges were selected based on the findings of the review of institutions' policies and practice undertaken as part of the research (see Appendix 1). Each institution selected demonstrated that they were taking steps to support estranged students with initiatives such as: a named contact, a guarantorship system, and/or bursaries for estranged students. Institutions were also selected to ensure diversity in terms of type of university (ancient, pre-92, post-92), size of college and geographic location (urban, town, rural).

An invitation to participate in the research was sent via email and included a research information sheet and privacy notice. ScotCen sent invitation emails to universities and ScotCen and Scottish Funding Council (SFC) sent invitation emails to colleges. Staff interested in participating in the research were asked to reply directly to ScotCen to express their interest in taking part in the research.

2.5. Conducting the research

The interview and focus group topic guides were developed in April 2022 in consultation with the Scottish Government and members of the Research Advisory Group formed by the Scottish Government for this project.

All interviews and focus groups were conducted either by telephone or video call (using MS Teams or Zoom). Interviews took place at times and dates which met with the preferences of participants. On the day of a scheduled interview or focus group, the researcher checked that the participant(s) had received and had a chance to read the project information sheet and privacy notice (either electronically or online). Participants were reminded that the interview or focus group was,

voluntary, confidential and their participation in the research would not be shared with anyone outside the research team. Participants were also reminded that their data would be securely processed and stored in line with UK GDPR. With the consent of participants, all interviews and focus groups were audio recorded using an encrypted digital recorder and transcribed for ease of analysis. Verbal consent was recorded at the start of each interview and focus group.

After completing an interview, estranged students received a £30 Love2Shop e-voucher as a one-off thank you gift for their time and for sharing their experiences, and an electronic 'useful contacts' leaflet of sources of further support.

2.6. Analysis

All transcripts were imported into and coded using NVivo 12, a software package which aids qualitative data analysis. Firstly, the key topics and issues which emerged from the research objectives and the data were identified through familiarisation with transcripts by members of the research team. A draft analytical framework was drawn up by the research team and piloted by three researchers on one transcript. The analytical framework was then refined after discussions within the wider project team. Once the analytical framework was finalised, each transcript was coded so that all the data on a particular theme could be viewed together.

Through reviewing the coded data, the full range of views and attitudes described by respondents were systematically mapped, and the accounts of different respondents, or groups of respondents, compared and contrasted.

2.7. Participant demographics

Forty-three people participated in the research: 25 estranged students, six stakeholders, seven college staff and five university staff.

2.7.1. Estranged students

Sixty-seven students expressed interest in taking part in the research. Forty-five students filled in the screening questionnaire, eight of whom did not meet the eligibility criteria for the research (either because they were not estranged or were in receipt of the Care Experienced Student Bursary, CESB). Twenty-eight students were invited to take part in an interview, of which 25 completed an interview.

Table 2 shows that the sample was split almost evenly between students studying at university (n=13) and college (n=12). Those studying at college were split evenly between HE and FE courses. Students from 11 universities and five colleges were interviewed as part of the research.

Table 2. Estranged students by type of institution and course level

Institution type	Further Education	HNC/HND	Degree
Large city college/ancient university	2	2	4
Town college/pre-92 university	5	3	5
Rural college/post-92 university	0	0	4
Total (n=25)	7	5	13

The estranged students who participated in the research were aged between 18 and 39 with the majority (n=20) aged 18-25 (Table 3). While the majority of students described themselves as white Scottish/British/Irish/European (Including Gypsy, Traveller, Roma and Showman/Showwoman) (n=17), approximately a third identified as Black, Asian, mixed or multiple ethnic groups (n=8). Over half (n=13) of the students were living in areas of SIMD quintiles 1 or 2.

Over half of the students who participated in the research identified as female (n=15) with four students stating their gender identity was different from the gender they were given at birth. The majority of students described themselves as bisexual (n=12) or heterosexual (n=9).

Approximately a third of students were living with a disability and/or long-term medical condition (n=8). Of the students who said they were living with a disability, five attended college and three attended university. Four students were parents. Approximately a quarter of participating students said they belonged to a religious denomination (n=6) (2 Muslim, 2 Catholic, 1 Christian and 1 Pagan).

Table 3. Summary table of estranged student demographics

Estranged students (n=25)	N
Age	
Under 18	0
18-20	10
21-25	10
26>	5
SIMD quintile	
1 (Those living in the 20% most deprived postcodes)	9
2	4
3	2
4	3
5 (Those living in the 20% least deprived postcodes)	7
Ethnicity	
White Scottish/British/Irish/European (Including Gypsy, Traveller, Roma and Showman/Showwoman)	17
Asian or Asian Scottish/British/Irish/European	5
Black African, Black Caribbean or Black Scottish/British/Irish/European	1
Mixed or multiple ethnic groups	1
Any other ethnic group	1
Gender	
Female (including trans woman)	15
Male (including trans man)	7
Non-binary	3
In another way (please write in)	0
Prefer not to say	0
Gender identity the same as the gender given at birth	
Yes	21
No	4
Prefer not to say	0
Sexuality	
Bisexual	12
Heterosexual	9
In another way (please write in)	3
Gay	1
Lesbian	0
Prefer not to say	0

Living with a disability/long-term medical condition	
Yes	8
No	16
Prefer not to say	1
Religion or religious denomination	
Yes	6
None	19
Prefer not to say	0

2.7.2. Stakeholders and college and university named contacts

Six stakeholders from five organisations took part in an interview.

Twelve institutional named contacts for estranged students took part in a focus group. Seven colleges (three large city, two small city/large town, and two rural colleges) and five universities (one ancient, two pre-92 and two post-92) were represented in the focus group.

2.8. Strengths and limitations of the research

There were a number of strengths and limitations associated with the research:

Sampling/recruitment

- Estranged students were recruited via SAAS and colleges. Those interested in participating in the research were asked to contact ScotCen directly. Everyone who expressed an interest was asked to complete screening questions. This enabled the research team to sample on a number of different criteria and resulted in the successful recruitment of a wide range of estranged students in terms of course type, institution type, age, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, SIMD, disability and caring responsibilities.
- It is possible that our modes of recruitment did not reach all estranged students living in Scotland. For example, no estranged students under the age of 18 expressed an interest in participating in the research. We do not know if this is due to our recruitment approach or another reason. For example, participants in this research tended to declare their estrangement later on in their course, sometime after they first became estranged.
- This study enhances the available evidence on the experiences of estranged students in education. It is unusual in that it includes students from colleges and universities across Scotland. Much of the existing qualitative literature tends to focus on students in one or two institutions. Additionally, the research explored not just the experiences of students themselves, but also considered the views of those who provide support in colleges, universities, and wider stakeholders. This provided a multi-dimensional view of the experiences of estranged students in FE and HE.

Findings

- The data gathered as part of this research was extremely rich and provides greater insight into the views of a range of estranged students, stakeholders

and college and university named contacts in Scotland. However, as with any qualitative data, its purpose is to provide a breadth of experiences rather than quantify these experiences. Therefore, this research is unable to demonstrate how prevalent these views are across Scotland, which would require a nationally representative quantitative survey (which in turn could not elicit the depth of response of qualitative interviews). As such, the findings from this research cannot be generalised to all estranged students in Scotland. However, they do provide an in-depth insight into the range of issues facing estranged students in Scotland at present.

3. Findings

3.1. Contexts of estrangement for students engaging with FE and HE in Scotland

This section explores the origins of students' estrangement from their parents/legal guardians/carers. It considers the factors which led to their estrangement, before exploring the definitions, declarations and evidencing of estrangement.

3.1.1 Reasons for estrangement

The students reported a number of different, though often overlapping factors, that had resulted in their estrangement. The reasons they gave for their estrangement tallied with the views of named contacts and key stakeholders, who were also asked why estrangement had occurred among students in their own working experiences.

One of the main themes reported was that there had been familial breakdown during childhood, which had resulted in difficult and at times "toxic" relationships between parents, step-parents and the students, as well as their siblings and other family members. Reasons cited for the familial breakdown included parental alcohol and drug addiction, mental health issues, paternal and maternal affairs and parental bereavement. As a consequence of familial breakdown, a few student respondents said that they had to adopt a carer role within the family when growing up, mostly for siblings and step-siblings, but also at times for a parent with mental health or addiction issues. Emotional, physical and sexual abuse were reported to have been experienced by the students, which at times had resulted in self-harm, suicide attempts, the involvement of police, social services as well as hospitalisation.

"I had to cut off my family because of the toxicity associated with a few things. Yes, there were also quite a lot of issues that were going on, like affairs and stuff and it was just not a healthy environment to be in family-wise." (Estranged student)

Another theme that was said to have been responsible for student estrangement was cultural conflict, particularly with the parents' religion, ethnicity or way of life. Examples were given of families moving to Scotland or Europe from non-European countries, and the students and their siblings adapting to the new environment and, in the eyes of their parents, rejecting or becoming opposed to their own cultural background. This was commonly related to the students stating that they were gay, bisexual and/or trans, resulting in parental rejection. However, it was also the case that, for example, young people enjoying more freedom and not adopting what was viewed as a more traditional role, or rejecting proposed forced marriages, also led to abusive parental relationships.

"You essentially have no freewill, whatever your elders decide is what goes pretty much, and they also had very sort of...backward views, I guess, it was very narrow minded. So, homophobia, racism,

that was just a normal thing in the household. So, I'd always felt estranged even when I had contact with my family, I never felt as if I had a proper relationship with them" (Estranged student)

"My parents were very transphobic and I'm trans, so I wasn't allowed to transition if I lived in their house; it was made very clear, and about two weeks after my birthday I was told to leave." (Estranged student)

In line with the published literature, the majority of the students became estranged between the ages of 17 and 19 years, though a few students reported estrangement at younger and older ages. One factor behind this was related to the young person reaching both a realisation that they had to escape a toxic environment, and an age which allowed them to do so, for example, by starting a college or university course. However, it was also the case that participants said parents and step-parents had threatened to 'throw' them out of the house once they were no longer entitled to age-related benefits, and either this had happened or the young person sought a safer or more welcoming environment.

"Obviously, at the same time, [my parent] didn't want me to, [they] had me on house arrest because if I moved, [they] lost the Carer's Allowance for me, so [they] only wanted me to stay there so [they] could get Carer's Allowance for me." (Estranged student)

Participating students often reported at least some contact with members of the family after becoming estranged. Most commonly, this contact was with siblings and step-siblings, as well as with grandparents. Occasional contact with parents and step-parents was also reported, though these encounters could be quite negative for the student, even if they were not face-to-face. It should be noted that a few of the students were now living in different countries to their parents.

3.1.2 Definitions of estrangement

Students were not always clear what estrangement was, and as a result not all considered themselves estranged when they were no longer in the family home or applying for university or college funding. This had implications for students self-declaring their status to their institutions and impacted on their ability to access appropriate support. Indeed, a number of student respondents only became aware of the concept of estrangement when applying for SAAS funding, or when already enrolled on a course, or when they sought help when they became homeless.

"[I had] no idea, and again, at the time I didn't even know there was support available for that kind of thing. I didn't even consider myself estranged. I didn't know that was the word for it." (Estranged student)

Other students said they were aware of the term and their own personal estrangement. Awareness of estrangement came about through the SAAS application, university and college named contacts, as well as other students and flatmates.

At the time the research was undertaken, the SAAS website (which provided guidance for estranged students) defined estranged students as those who are not in contact with their parents/legal guardians, and where there has been 'a permanent breakdown in your (the student's) relationship, and there is no sign of this being resolved in the future'. A 'permanent' breakdown was defined as having no contact for a least 12 months, with the caveat that applications would be assessed on a case by case basis. Nevertheless, there was a perception amongst those that were interviewed (stakeholders and college and university staff, and students themselves) that 12 months of no contact would be expected by SAAS. Participants viewed this as problematic, pointing out that students with limited, irregular contact with a parent may not fall neatly into the category of estrangement. This was especially the case for those who were recently estranged, or who, in line with the published evidence, became estranged between leaving school and entering college or university and so would find it hard to meet this criterion.

"I'd say probably just very anecdotally in the years that I've now been doing this work, there are so few estranged students I've spoken to who actually were estranged for at least 12 months before they actually went to higher education. These are students already living independently, and it's a very different situation to if you are 17, 18, you're still at home but you desperately want to get out. University is on the horizon, it's your opportunity to go, and that's when you leave. You leave in the summer before going to university, and it just does not work with the policies that are currently in place."
(Stakeholder)

Several students expressed concern that fleeting contacts with their parents (e.g. to obtain documentation, to hear of a family bereavement, or to check on their siblings) could leave them in breach of their funding and were fearful of potential consequences. Named contacts shared these concerns, worrying it may dissuade students from coming forward to self-declare, and arguing that there could still be occasional, though emotionally challenging, contact with a parent.

"The understanding that I had from Stand Alone was that there could still be contact, but that contact could be very difficult, very challenging, very triggering. Maybe there's still contact with siblings and extended family and stuff like that, but they in the main would still be considered to be estranged." (College named contact)

Although care experienced students and estranged students are eligible for different levels of funding, named contacts and stakeholders felt there were similarities in the experiences of these groups. Both groups of students were thought to experience similar challenges at home and during their studies. In some cases, challenges were viewed as greater for estranged students because they were not able to draw upon local authority support or corporate parents.

"We just recognised that these are students in very similar situations to those with experience of the care system. In some ways worse off, in the sense that they didn't have parental support and they

never had had any local authority support either, so they were really falling between two stools there.” (Stakeholder)

There was a perception among students, stakeholders and university and college named contacts that the definitions used, particularly by Scottish Government/SAAS could be restrictive. As a student who was not eligible for SAAS' estranged student support package said:

“I think in order to better support estranged students, you've got to widen the net. Something that happens a lot is that support tends to be specialised on very specific aspects, and there are a lot of exclusion criteria. I think that makes it a lot easier for people to slip through the cracks, and people who really need the support don't get it in the end.” (Estranged student)

The stakeholders tended to say that there had been an improvement in terms of the recognition and application of the definition of estrangement in recent years, much of this perceived to be due to the work of Stand Alone in the area. However, named contacts expressed concern that as a result of issues around self-identification there may be more estranged students than university and college staff are aware of, and called for Scottish Government (SG)/SAAS and Scottish Funding Council (SFC) to adopt a unified definition of estrangement.

3.1.3 Declarations of estrangement

The students reported a range of responses in relation to declaring their own estrangement. Most higher education (HE) students had declared they were estranged at the time of making their funding application to SAAS, although as mentioned above, some had not done so as they had not understood themselves to be estranged. However, students were less likely to say they had self-declared to their institution. Often students said they were unaware that this would have allowed them to access additional support. Others reported an overall reluctance to declare themselves as estranged to their institution, citing feelings of embarrassment, pride and shame. Cultural factors also played a part in this:

“In certain cultures, you can't really talk to other people about things. I just felt like they wouldn't understand, and I was kind of embarrassed to have been going through that.” (Estranged student)

Where students had declared to their institution, this tended to happen later in their course (sometimes a year or more after enrolment), often at times of crisis. This could be due to becoming aware of their situation, a change in circumstances leading to a funding or accommodation application (e.g. homelessness), legal proceedings, or a need to inform teaching staff they needed academic support or were considering dropping out. Late declarations could lead to delays in students receiving financial support through SAAS/their institution or to them being assessed according to their parental income rather than as an independent student (see Section 3.2). Named contacts expressed concern about delays in declarations, with one noting, ‘if students aren't disclosing, how do they know what they're entitled to?’ Another said:

“They're coming to financial aid. They have not declared to SAAS that they're estranged, so they're getting the minimum loan, no bursary. They have no parental income there, so SAAS are like, 'okay, we presume that your parents are above the threshold at which we would bring that into account'. They're pitching up at financial aid, and financial aid are like, 'okay, you need to speak to [named contact], because he can help you get the funding from SAAS that you're entitled to'. That still happens on an ongoing basis, advising teams at the university, student support officers at the university, financial aid, and internal referrals still happen. Which is a shame really.” (University named contact)

Some students said they had adopted an approach of being as open as possible to others in terms of their estrangement and relationships with their parents. A small number of students who became estranged while in school said they had disclosed their experiences to a headteacher or guidance staff, sometimes with support from social work and housing services. These contacts then helped the students inform the colleges and universities that they were estranged. Nonetheless, only one degree student, and one further education (FE) student, had declared their status to their institution prior to the start of their course. Other students noted a reluctance to declare to school staff, fearing the implications of disclosure on their family.

The students gave a varied response in terms of staff who had been made aware of their estrangement. Directors of study, named contacts, study advisers, health and wellbeing advisers, lecturers and those involved in student funding were all cited as those who had been informed by the students. Generally, students declared to a member of teaching staff rather than to named contacts.

In terms of institutional data on estranged students, named contacts tended to state that the current figures they had for estranged students were unreliable, and contrasted the difference between the 100-plus number of students who ticked the 'estranged' box, and the 15-30 students they actively supported. Concerns were expressed that under-18s were not declaring themselves as estranged. It was thought that possible reasons for this were that some were dropping out of courses within the first few weeks of term or individuals were ticking the box incorrectly. It was also possible that students were reporting estrangement during the academic year (either due to lack of awareness of estrangement or losing contact with family during the course) after the figures had been collated. Stakeholders added that care-experienced, young carers and estranged students are often counted together as one group, when their needs can be quite different.

3.1.4 Experiences and understanding of evidencing estrangement

The students gave a mixed response to the process of evidencing estrangement to SAAS, universities and colleges. For some, particularly those who had been declared homeless, the process was relatively straightforward, with support, advice and confirmation provided by council officials, such as housing officers. Others (e.g. those living with partners/friends or parents of their partner/friend) found the process more difficult to navigate as they did not have ready access to information

that proved their estrangement. Some college and university named contacts said they would be able to accept a students' word as evidence of their estrangement, but students were not always aware of this. Furthermore, some FE students said they were unsure which 'box to tick' when making their college bursary applications. Accessing appropriate funding was problematic for two students who were born outside the UK and struggled to prove settled status. This is not an issue which is exclusive to estrangement, but this nonetheless meant both students had no access to any form of government funding or parental financial support.

"Quite a lot just with all the circumstantial stuff and of course financially as well because there are so many little loopholes and policies that kind of can mess you up a bit if you're estranged. I think people that don't know the legalities and stuff, they would probably struggle with it a lot because some of the terminology and stuff, it's just really hard to understand. It's not something you would expect or imply in your head going into it. Then you can get hit on the head with all these random things that you didn't actually know you had to do." (Estranged student)

The process of evidencing estrangement was perceived as stressful by both students and those who worked with them. Students registered as estranged with SAAS are not required to contact their parents to evidence their estrangement. However, some students and named contacts spoke of instances where students felt they had to contact their parents to obtain documents relating to parental income, highlighting a lack of awareness among some students and their institutions around support for estranged students. In one case, an FE student struggled to convince their college they were estranged, noting how their situation did not fit into a funding system used to dealing with more traditional students who still have the support of their parents.

"Because I said I wasn't paying my own rent, because I was staying with my partner's parents, they were asking me for my parent's income and I said, 'look, I can't really get that'. It took me months and it was like just replies of replies to funding saying, 'look, this is what's happened, I can't get my parent's income'. I eventually had to get in touch with my mum and hope that she would give me like her income and stuff, but it just made the situation so much more complicated. I eventually explained that...and they eventually kind of agreed basically." (Estranged student)

"A student who comes to you and advises that they're estranged from their family, I almost feel split in two because half of me, obviously, wants to support them in whatever way I can. But the other half of me thinks, 'well, I need them to be able to prove that they are actually estranged'. You feel that you make them jump through additional hurdles, probably make them repeat their story to you and you don't know how many other folk they've had to tell the same story to. So, you're split in two because you want to try and make it as easy as possible for them and provide all the support you

can, but on the other hand you need some evidence.” (University named contact)

University and, in particular, college named contacts reported that they could be more flexible than they perceived SAAS to be. They noted, for example, they could accept the word of students themselves if they said that they were estranged, though this varied by institution. There was also an aspiration that one application, such as the SAAS application, may then feed through to all other relevant parts of the system for the student. The stakeholders shared these views, and also added that there should be no need for 12 month estrangement eligibility for student applications.

3.2. Impact of estrangement on finance

The impact of estrangement on estranged students’ finances tended to be the greatest challenge faced by interviewees, and was very closely related to accommodation insecurity, mental health and wellbeing, and academic progress and transitions. This section explores the financial challenges faced by estranged students. It considers levels of financial anxiety, students’ sources of income, and their experiences of financial hardship. It explores issues relating to debt, their experiences of accessing discretionary funds and of managing their finances outside of term. It ends with a discussion of how financial support might be improved for estranged students.

3.2.1 Financial anxiety

Students reported high levels of anxiety around money and not having enough to live off without parental support. This was linked to the high cost of accommodation and the threat of homelessness, as well as worries about debt (from student loans and elsewhere). For many, financial stresses often worsened students’ already fragile mental health arising from trauma caused by their estrangement.

Few students reported being able to afford anything other than the essentials, let alone ‘luxuries’ associated with socialising. Students were very aware that their experiences of college/university differed markedly to their peers as a result of their estrangement, but their financial struggles added to their sense of isolation.

“Now, because I've gone completely through all my savings, sometimes I just feel like I don't even know what to do. I'm so stressed to the point, right, I just don't even care anymore. I lose all hope and, yes, I think that's when I quite spiral out of control a bit, just because money is so important that if you don't have it, it feels so horrible, and you just feel so alone. I think that's how I feel is, I always constantly feel stressed. I constantly feel depressed and anxious, and I have to make up excuses [not to socialise] with my friends.” (Estranged student)

Whilst the distress caused by financial worries was most critical at the point at which students first became estranged, these experiences tended to have a lasting

impact. Some interviewees in their 30s who became estranged in their teens were still grappling with the impact of financial anxiety a decade or more later.

The time spent worrying about money and the need to supplement their SAAS/institution’s support also had a significant impact on students’ perceived academic attainment – both before entering FE/HE and during their time at college or university. This was partly as a result of having to work more part-time hours during term-time, but also because it was hard to focus on studying while worrying about how to support themselves and where they might live. This was even greater for those with dependents.

“If I don't have enough money from SAAS, I have to work more, which in turn impacts the amount of hours I spend studying, so I feel like my grades aren't as good as they should be, and it is also the thought of - I don't know about other people, but for myself, money is my main problem, and I feel like it's the main thing that is holding me back from reaching my full potential, because I can't stop stressing about my finances.” (Estranged student)

3.2.2 Sources of income

Students relied on various sources of income, as summarised in Table 4.

Table 4: Overview of estranged students’ sources of funding

	Number of students (n=25)
SAAS student loan	16
SAAS: Independent Student Bursary (maximum)	11
SAAS: Independent Student Bursary (lower level)	3
SAAS: Assessed as Young Student (with/out bursary)	3
FE bursary	4
College discretionary funding	4
University discretionary funding	5
Paid work during term-time	13
Scholarship	4
Universal Credit/PIP	5
Childcare Allowance	3
Financial support from extended family	3
Savings	1

All but two HE students received a living cost loan (one was deemed ineligible for SAAS support due to not meeting residency criteria at the time they started their studies, while the other chose not to take the loan due to concerns about debt).

Three students aged 18 to 19 said they had been assessed as Young Students and received lower amounts of student support than they would had they been assessed as Independent Students and received an Independent Student Bursary (ISB) (one received only a loan and no bursary). Two said that they had not declared their estrangement to SAAS when applying for support, partly as a result of embarrassment. A third student became estranged days before starting university, by which point they had already applied to SAAS as a Young Student. A further three estranged students were aged over 25, but did not receive the

maximum levels of ISB. All six students had very limited funding from which to draw upon, with some receiving the minimum loan with no bursary.

Four HE students participating in this research received a scholarship of some kind aimed at estranged students; either from their own institution or from an external funding body.

Four of the seven FE student participants said they received the FE bursary, while the remainder received some form of benefit (Universal Credit or Personal Independence Payment, (PIP)). Often they also received college discretionary funds as well. Several FE students mentioned that their bursaries had been reduced or stopped as a result of low attendance. Some of these students had missed classes to do paid work, while others were disabled but struggled to provide evidence of their disabilities to the college.

“Money is a struggling thing right now. The college have stopped my bursary because I've had more than six absences since January. [...] It has meant that I'm now struggling with money more than ever. [My partner and I are] having to borrow from friends, borrow from family just to make ends meet every month.” (Estranged student)

3.2.3 Views on student funding

Many students deemed current levels of funding (be that from SAAS or FE colleges) insufficient to pay for essentials, let alone allow them to join in with the wider ‘student experience’. Even students who received the maximum levels of support through the ISB, and in some cases scholarships as well, frequently complained that most of their income was taken up with the cost of accommodation, leaving them little to pay for bills, food, study materials, travel, childcare, laptops, and other costs associated with studying.

“Awful. Honestly awful, because as soon as my SAAS comes in, it goes straight to rent. My rent is going up next year. Usually, I would have say £1,000 bursary to myself to spend on food and stuff, but because my rent is going up, I can't have it anymore, I have to pay it into rent. If I didn't have the scholarship, I genuinely wouldn't have any money. It would be really bad.” (Estranged student)

Only two students lived in university accommodation, and both were scholarship recipients. For most estranged students, student accommodation (university owned or private), and to a slightly lesser extent, privately rented accommodation, was considered out of reach on account of it being too expensive. Students who lived with relatives, their partner's or a friend's parents (free of charge or made a small contribution to the running of the household), found their money went further, as did those in council housing (often as a result of having previously been homeless).

“I think I would've probably felt differently if I was living in student accommodation this year because I don't think the loan is enough to get by if you live in student accommodation. The maximum loan - which I'm receiving - last year was £775 every single month, but

student accommodation is almost £800 a month, most of the time, for most of the ones that I know.” (Estranged student)

While cheaper accommodation eased financial worries, even those who received scholarships, or had their rent paid by the council/college nonetheless expressed high levels of financial anxiety and experienced hardship.

Students reported varying degrees of financial hardship, depending on their sources of income and whether they were funding the costs of their accommodation themselves. Some students survived on very little, especially those who were assessed as Young Students; were ineligible for SAAS support; awaiting Universal Credit payments; or who had chosen not to take on a loan due to concerns about debt. These students were living off overdrafts, income from part-time work or handouts. Table 4 shows that 13 students interviewed undertook paid work during term-time, with their hours ranging from 3 to 40 hours per week. While most did less than 20 hours per week, three students worked more than this, with two working the equivalent of full-time hours alongside their studies. Several students said they used food banks regularly, had skipped meals or had to eat cheaply surviving on low-cost foods such as noodles or beans.

“The thing is because, so I had luck, so to say, because I don't really eat breakfast, but I still had to choose, do I eat for three to four days, once a day, or do I eat twice a day, but for two days? That was stressful because I had to always think, okay, do I want to eat and feel well, or do I want to save money, so that I know that at the end of the month, I can still eat something?” (Estranged student)

Students spoke of the difficulty of furnishing their accommodation. Some had gone without flooring or curtains, had no working oven, or had no bedding. The cost of living crisis was frequently mentioned as an additional challenge, with some looking for ways to reduce their energy use. Travel costs could be considerable, particularly for those living with partners/friends/extended family who often commuted considerable distances to their college/university. Overall, there was a sense of estranged students feeling further isolated by their precarious finances.

“I had no work and the student loan thing; you have to pay the money back into the system. I mean, I'm not getting benefits, you can't have benefits when you're a full-time student and the bills, the inflation spike, and the cost of living, you feel like you're just surviving basically. You're not going out, you're just staying in, working on your computer and that's pretty much how life is now these days.” (Estranged student)

For those with children, the cost of nursery and afterschool care was a significant concern. Several who received the childcare allowance from their institution noted the gap between their childcare funding and the actual cost. Some students were also financially supporting their estranged siblings, and struggled to provide for themselves and those they were supporting. None of these students made reference to accessing the dependents' grant.

At the point of estrangement, students often left home with very little, sometimes only the clothes they were wearing. For these students in particular, the timing at which they were able to access financial support through SAAS or their institution was critical. However, some reported that issues around self-declaration and evidencing estrangement had delayed their funding. Named contacts pointed to gaps in provision in terms of funding for student accommodation, with universities generally asking for accommodation deposits to be paid in the summer, and SAAS funding not being paid until September. Without knowing their estranged student intake in advance, there was little universities felt they could do in terms of putting support provision in place.

3.2.4 Debt

Being in debt in one form or another was common for the estranged students in this research, and played a key role in money worries. The types of debts included: overdrafts; debts owed to Universal Credit having received overpayments; debts for childcare owed to nurseries; credit card and utility bill debts. Often debts related to accommodation costs, and this was especially the case for those who had been homeless at some point. Several students who lived in council housing were in rent arrears, while others owed money for homeless accommodation. One student had been taken to court as a result of rent arrears. Some students also mentioned debts they had mistakenly taken on for their parents.

Related to debt issues, students often noted how poor their money management skills were without parents to provide examples as to how to pay bills and manage their spending. Several students said they had impulsive spending habits, partly due to not knowing how to manage their money, but also related to having little money as a child. The majority, however, said they had learned to keep a very close eye on their spending.

“You don’t know how to deal with debt, and you don’t know how to get out of debt. Especially when you’ve got mental health problems and things like that, the last thing you want to be thinking about is like organising your finances.” (Estranged student)

“It means that I need to be a lot more aware of what I’m doing at all times because there are people that will just think, ‘oh its fine if I go way over budget, I’ll just ask my mum or my dad for some more money’. Obviously, I don’t exactly have that privilege, which means that I need to constantly be very aware of, ‘okay, am I going to be able to spend this much money? Can I actually afford this, do I really need this, or do I just want this?’” (Estranged student)

HE students, most of whom had taken out student loans for living costs, raised concerns about having student loan debt. The thought of repaying these placed an additional burden on the students. One student had been so concerned about student loan debt that they did not take the loan, instead living off the £1000 bursary and paid work. Others described the negative impact of being in debt.

“You have to get certain grades for this, and it's a lot harder to study for things when you have the crushing weight of debt on your shoulders. It impacts so many facets of life, just your sleep, how you can focus. It impacts how you deal with stress in general.”
(Estranged student)

Some HE students, stakeholders and institutional named contacts complained of what they viewed as unfairness built into SAAS support for estranged students. They highlighted that students from the lowest income backgrounds who live with their parents receive a higher bursary and lower student loan than those receiving ISB.

“How is it fair that a person who is estranged from their parents and run away or something has to also pay back more money? That's weird.” (Estranged student)

Participants also made comparisons between the support provided to care experienced students who received a full bursary and have no debt and estranged students who accrue higher levels of debt for their living costs. Many participants felt that the challenges faced by the two groups of students were similar, and that, in some cases, estranged students were more vulnerable, because they did not receive the additional financial support from the Scottish Government.

“I feel a bit annoyed that I could be getting more money if I'd been put into a care home instead of being put into a hostel, when if I was in a care home I would have been looked after, and in a hostel, I had to do everything myself. [...] I became homeless two weeks after my 16th birthday. I was still under 18. I had no support from anybody.”
(Estranged student)

“Care experienced students over recent years have had huge developments in terms of the Care Experienced Bursary and the Summer Accommodation Grant, where you can actually build that financial base to study independently. Estranged students, it's actually the polar opposite where there is typically less bursary and more of a loan element, and no support over the summer.”
(University named contact)

3.2.5 Discretionary funding

Colleges and universities' discretionary or hardship funds (the terms were used interchangeably by participants) were a key source of income for students. These funds are designed for students experiencing financial hardship of some sort. They are open to all eligible students to apply, though the guidance prioritises funds for some groups, including estranged students (as well as students who are carers, care experienced students, students with dependent children, part-time students and those impacted financially by COVID-19). Students apply directly to their institution, and are generally expected to provide some form of evidence as to why they need the fund. More than a third of the estranged students (n=9) interviewed in

this research had received discretionary funding of some kind from their institution (four from colleges, and five from universities).

Named contacts from colleges and universities, and students themselves, noted how reliant estranged students often were on discretionary funding, given that they had few other sources of income to access.

“I think it's one of the only sources that the students can apply to. Where care experienced students get so much - which is great, and they've got the Care Experienced Bursary and everything - but I still feel like estranged students very much fall through the cracks and don't have the same legal sort of rights or funding. So, they're very reliant on the discretionary fund with us.” (University named contact)

There was significant variation reported as to how institutions administered discretionary funds. This was particularly the case in terms of FE, where named contacts pointed to differences between colleges in how the funds were distributed. Some college named contacts said they used discretionary funds to automatically ‘top up’ estranged students’ FE bursaries to make them equivalent to the Care Experienced Student Bursary (CESB). In this way, some of the estranged student interviewees had their rent paid, thereby reducing their worries considerably.

“My financial situation, if it wasn't for the support that I've had from the college, I wouldn't be able to be in education at the moment. I know that I would have to be working to even keep my house going. So, I'm grateful that the college was able to put that extra place and support for students to get into education.” (Estranged student)

The majority of college named contacts, however, said their college did not do this. Instead, they assessed students on a case by case basis. Both stakeholders and college named contacts highlighted that the current discretionary fund guidance from SFC lacks information specifically relating to how these funds should be administered to estranged students in FE. Some suggested that this could lead to a ‘postcode lottery’ in terms of how FE students are supported.

“I think the SFC guidance, where often, they'll say, 'Well, it's up to an institution's discretion', and then that's challenging because that then means that the discretion in one institution is different to another, so a student may get something in one and then progress somewhere and not get that. [...] I think the guidance from SFC should be clearer.” (College named contact)

There was also some variation among the universities in terms of how they interpreted definitions of estrangement which impacted the ability of some students to access support. For example, some universities would not allow students who were not eligible for support from SAAS to access discretionary funds, while others administered discretionary funding whether or not the student had accessed SAAS support. This led to one student dropping out of their degree, though they later returned and successfully accessed funding.

Estranged students who had received or applied for discretionary funding expressed mixed views in terms of the ease of doing so. While some found it a straightforward process, others found it more difficult providing all the documents required. Several students from both FE and HE had accessed additional support through their institution as part of funds set aside to assist students with the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Often students said they had applied for discretionary funding to cover their rent during the summer when their funding stopped. One estranged student was awaiting a decision from their institution after not being able to get enough hours from their paid work.

“I am trying to find more work, but right now my job won’t give me overtime... So, it’s like really bad and I had filled in an application basically to help with my rent for the next few months before I start getting my loan and SAAS again in case I can’t find a job in time, but they haven’t got back to me, so I’m a little stressed about that, but it’s okay. I’ll just live off of raisins.” (Estranged student)

One student said their application for discretionary funding had been turned down. Named contacts noted that some students are turned down from discretionary funding because they are unable to demonstrate that the available balance in their bank accounts is low enough. This could exclude estranged students who had accrued savings to get them through the summer period with no funding.

“It might be particular to our institution, I don't know, but certainly a massive, massive barrier that we come up against time and time again is that for our estranged students, the money that they have is all that they have. They do not have a financial support network; they are routinely getting turned away from hardship funding because they are doing their best to work multiple jobs, to save any money that is coming in. Therefore, they do not qualify often for hardship funding - which they very genuinely need to access.” (University named contact)

Some estranged students were unaware that discretionary funding was available to them, or that estranged students are listed as a priority group for these funds. This was linked to wider issues about students not understanding estrangement and a lack of awareness of available support.

“I didn't know it was an option and I didn't know I qualified for it, so it was being made aware of it. When I was submitting my application, I was really doubtful. I was like, there's no chance, all the other folk will need this. I kind of felt really quite guilty for it, but then they were like, you're having a hard time, I was like, ‘thanks, appreciate it’.” (Estranged student)

Among those who were aware of the funds, students reported finding out about the discretionary funds from other students, or from named contacts or lecturers, but they were rarely aware of these early on in their courses. Several estranged students expressed a reluctance to apply, citing feelings of guilt, pride, shame and

embarrassment. Often students suggested that others were probably in a worse situation than they were themselves.

“I didn't really want to apply for it because I feel like it's kind of a pride thing for me. I'm kind of in this mindset where I'm like, I got myself into this mess, I should get myself out of it, kind of thing.”
(Estranged student)

3.2.6 Summer finances

A key trigger for having to apply for discretionary funding was the lack of SAAS or FE bursary payments over the summer months. This tied in with the difficulties experienced by some students in finding accommodation over summer (see Section 3.3).

“During the summer, a lot of students will be struggling so much without their SAAS. I think SAAS is what a lot of people use to pay most of their rent.” (Estranged student)

The interviews with students in this research took place in May/June 2022, just as students received their final student support payments until the coming September. Most planned to try and find paid employment over the summer, but few had positions lined up. Some students spoke of the difficulties of finding enough work to support them over the summer. Several already in employment noted they would not be able to increase their hours in their current role and would have to seek alternative employment. Students were very much aware of how their summers differed to their non-estranged peers.

“We have to struggle trying to find money when we are in summertime, and then people who are supported by their family can literally just go back to their family and they don't have to pay stuff. [...] We shouldn't just leave people with no money for the summer. If you are also, if you are going about passing your exams and stuff, you shouldn't also then have to worry about getting a job at the same time.” (Estranged student)

Stakeholders and named contacts were particularly vocal about the need for funding to be provided throughout the summer, highlighting the potential impact of this on drop out.

“I know it's good for your self-development to get a part-time job but for some people they can't do that if they've got caring responsibilities; if they've got mental health issues; if it's just the area they live in is really experiencing high levels of unemployment. That's when they have to start choosing between eating over the summer or going back to uni. That's a real pressure point for students from low income backgrounds.” (Stakeholder)

Stakeholders and named contacts also highlighted the challenges for estranged students who lose all their financial and accommodation support at the point of

graduation. To address this, they suggested a number of ways to improve outcomes for estranged students after graduation, for example: extending guarantorships and access to student accommodation beyond graduation, and exploring bridging bursaries to provide financial support.

3.2.7 Improving student support for estranged students

There was significant demand from stakeholders, named contacts and students for funding for estranged students to be amended so it is similar to that of the CESB. Participants said providing estranged students with a larger bursary would help to reduce some of the stress experienced by estranged students, and ensure student loan debt did not act as a deterrent. More widely, participants called for improved communication of the additional support available to estranged students.

“I think better communication, because if folk don't know then they're not going to apply. [...] I'm really fortunate that it worked out like that, but for some people they're going to look at the price tag and they just won't apply because they're not going to be able to. If they know that the support and the funding is there for them, it might just take that feeling of exclusion away, if that makes sense. I don't really know how SAAS works. I don't really know the whole concept of having to pay it back and what not, but maybe recognising, maybe making bursaries available rather than loans for estranged students.” (Estranged student)

“But I do think the support package needs to be developed completely, and there's a model there with care experience students, but estranged students tend to be very vulnerable and, as I said, the trauma tends to be quite live and at the moment.” (University named contact)

Stakeholders, named contacts and students, however, also suggested that, given the costs of accommodation, the £8,100 provided through the CESB may not be enough. Some stakeholders and named contacts called for this to be supplemented with an accommodation bursary. Others highlighted the importance of increasing bursaries so that they are in line with current inflation, rather being pegged to the 2017 Living Wage as current levels of CESB are. This would address students' worries about rising inflation and the cost of living crisis.

Students were often unaware of the existence of discretionary funding, while others were reluctant to apply or had been refused it. Students called for better promotion of the funds to help normalise this type of funding and make students feel more comfortable in asking for help.

Stakeholders and named contacts requested 'clearer' guidance for FE as to how colleges could distribute discretionary funding to estranged students. Participants would like to have more information on the range of ways discretionary funding could be used to support students. Linked to this, stakeholders and staff from both FE and HE highlighted the potential benefits of expanding corporate parenting to

include estranged students, noting that this parity of esteem would ensure fewer estranged students fall through the cracks.

There was a lack of understanding generally as to the type of financial support available to estranged students via their institution/SAAS. Students were not always aware of whether they were assessed as a Young or Independent Student, and of the implications of this for the funding they received. Often, it was only once students met their named contact that they were made aware of the range of financial support available to them.

3.3. Impact of estrangement on accommodation

Closely related to the financial impact of estrangement, accommodation issues were a considerable challenge for students. Experiences of homelessness were common among the interviewees. They highlighted the inaccessibility and instability of some types of accommodation, and the challenges associated with accessing guarantorships and finding secure housing outwith term-time. This section explores these impacts, concluding with a summary of participants' suggestions for ways to improve estranged students' experiences of accommodation.

3.3.1 Current living situation

Estranged students' current living situations were varied, as summarised in Table 5.

Table 5: Overview of estranged students' current living situation

Type of accommodation	Number of students (n=25)
Council housing	8
Private rental	7
Living with friends/relatives	6
Student accommodation	2
Housing Association	2

Most students lived in either council housing or privately rented accommodation. Those in council housing had often experienced homelessness, and tended to feel more financially secure in this cheaper type of accommodation despite the poor conditions and what participants' described as 'dodgy' locations of some accommodation. Those students living in privately rented accommodation had mixed experiences, noting the high cost of rent and bills, and sometimes the poor quality of living environments. However, it was mentioned that this provided them with certain freedoms, safety and security that they had not experienced before in more temporary accommodation or in their living situation prior to estrangement.

Six students lived with extended family, partners or friend's parents, something which offered both financial security and emotional support, but also came with feelings of guilt as a result of relying on others for help with accommodation. The only students living in student accommodation received scholarships of some kind.

3.3.2 Securing stable accommodation

A key challenge in terms of securing stable accommodation was the high cost of accommodation. Many students deemed the cost of private accommodation, and to an even greater extent student accommodation, to be too high given available levels of student funding. This limited the options available to students.

“I've looked [at private accommodation], but everything is more expensive than what I already pay. I would go through social housing; I just haven't had a chance to look at the application yet. I already know myself that the process is quite long, like it can take a year or two to actually find a place, and even then, it might not be something that you want or isn't in your budget.” (Estranged student)

Those living in halls of residence noted the benefits of meeting other students and forming good relationships with their peers, but the expense remained a concern.

“There's a lot of perks about [student accommodation]. It's just, yes, I like it, I've made a lot of friends through the accommodation as well. I never feel alone, I always have someone there, and my flat mates, they're really understanding...the downside of it is just how expensive it is.” (Estranged student)

In looking for alternative, more affordable accommodation, estranged students were more vulnerable to ending up in unpleasant or unsafe living environments which did not suit their needs. Several mentioned that they lived in deprived areas with high levels of antisocial behaviour.

Students frequently described needing to move accommodation regularly because they lacked a secure, long-term living situation. They found themselves moving between different types of temporary accommodation and/or the houses of friends, relatives and partners. Students explained that frequent moves had a negative impact on their wellbeing.

“[Moving a lot is] really hard, because you never really feel like you have a home. It's just kind of like a place where you stay, where you know in a couple of months, you're going to have to pack your things and move again. It gets really hard to settle in places like that.” (Estranged student)

“I was just constantly having to move around because I didn't have the financial security and stuff like that to get into a good flat, to give myself a secure home life so I was going for cheap rubbish places and putting myself in an environment that made me really unhappy so that led to me moving again, moving again in search of a place where I could live happily. In turn that obviously impacts everywhere else in your life, it's like a basic necessity, I would say in a way, to have a secure place you can call home, you know.” (Estranged student)

Students who lived with family or the parents of partners/friends tended to say that they felt less alone and thrived as a result of being made part of a home. Students spoke of the relief of finding stable housing after having experienced frequent moves, and the benefits this had on their wellbeing. However, students who lived with family or friends noted that this had the potential to strain relationships. Despite being told they were welcome to stay, some perceived that they were a burden and were concerned they could be asked to leave at any time. A few comments were elicited which showed that these students were uncomfortable that they might be putting others at risk of legal action from their landlords as a result of subletting.

“There was just a lot of moving, a lot of insecurity, and I was like, 'Well, I'm not meant to be staying here,' so that would put my friends and everyone else in trouble. So, I ended up moving here, and now I'm like, okay. So, I'm being told I can consider this as home, but I am like, oh, on the 'what if' chance, like, what if they're like, 'You need to move out,' or something?” (Estranged student)

Moving house, whether frequently or not, was challenging for a lot of the estranged students. These students spoke of the practical difficulties they faced when needing to move their belongings without the parental support other students received, and some felt alienated from their peers because of this.

“Whilst I was at college, I moved into my house that I'm currently living at and I wasn't able to ask my parents for help. Even as simple as getting a moving truck or asking them to help me move things, and I was quite conflicted in the classroom because my college mates couldn't understand that.” (Estranged student)

For those who moved into unfurnished accommodation, the cost and practicality of furnishing their new place was an issue. A few students experienced moving into housing with no provisions, and no money to address this. Others found ways to furnish their accommodation for a low cost, searching for cheap options online, utilising the help of friends and Facebook groups, and applying for grants.

“It was really hard in the beginning because when we moved, there was nothing, there was absolutely nothing. No floors, nothing, absolutely nothing. We didn't have beds.” (Estranged student)

The additional challenges and responsibilities faced by estranged students contributed to them feeling like they had to become an adult more quickly than their peers. They felt apprehensive about figuring out how to live independently and spoke about the other important relationships they turned to for guidance.

“It's only the second time that I've ever had a flat to myself, so I'm still trying to learn how to be an adult living on my own - which is difficult at times. Dishes build up, the washing needs done, but at the end of the day, no one else is going to do them so I have to.” (Estranged student)

Despite many students describing the adjustment to independent living as challenging and overwhelming at times, positive aspects of living independently as an estranged student were also mentioned. These related to having greater freedom and control over their own life and becoming more 'resourceful'.

"To me it was like a fresh slate. To me it was like, right, this is a secure bed that nobody can kick me out of because it's mine, it's my responsibility to pay for it. [...] It was my space; I could lock the door and nobody had a say on it. It was so different. Living with folk my own age, it was just a different environment, but it was really positive." (Estranged student)

3.3.3 Non-term-time accommodation

Securing stable accommodation outwith term-time was a key challenge for estranged students. Institutional and private student accommodation lets often correlated with term dates, leaving some students without anywhere to live during the university holidays. While some universities offered year-round accommodation, this type of support was not available at all universities. Where year-round accommodation was available, students and named contacts discussed how some students still had to move between university accommodation over summer. The anxiety caused by this uncertainty could be resolved by enabling students to stay in the same university accommodation all year without having to move between rooms or locations.

"I'm supporting a student at the minute who hasn't yet heard where she needs to move to within the university estate, because she needs to vacate her current room. They're doing their best to get in place all the requirements that she has, but I guess even with the 365 offer, there are tension points where the fear of homelessness is very real and very anxiety-making." (University named contact)

The additional cost of funding year-round accommodation was also raised by students and named contacts who noted that the lack of summer funding meant estranged students had to work to cover their accommodation costs. The cost of funding summer accommodation in student halls was prohibitive for some.

"I'd rather be homeless than stay [in student accommodation] because it's just too expensive...I'd rather leave." (Estranged student)

Estranged students who did use non-term-time student accommodation reported feeling marked out as different from those who could return to their family homes during the holidays, and these feelings of isolation were exacerbated by living on an empty university campus. However, other students overcame this issue by relying on relatives or friends to provide them with temporary accommodation to cover the holiday period, though this was not an option for all.

"I was living with some friends in the summer - because they don't let you live in student accommodation - and I just used the

emergency Covid money I got to pay rent there. I was reasonably fine, but yes, food-wise I think I survived off toast and multivitamins that entire summer.” (Estranged student)

3.3.4 Guarantorship

In order to rent private accommodation and, in many cases, institutions’ own student accommodation, students are required to provide the name of someone (usually a parent/guardian) who can act as a guarantor in the event that they are unable to pay their rent. When asked if they had ever felt any impacts of not being able to provide a guarantor, about half of the students interviewed said they had not needed to use a guarantor for their living situation. These students mostly lived in council housing or with relatives, friends or a partner. Of those who reported requiring a guarantor, around half were able to name someone they knew whilst others had to pay a large upfront sum to resolve the issue, such as several months of rent in advance, which most could not afford. Otherwise they were only able to consider alternative accommodation not requiring the endorsement of a guarantor.

“Because I didn't have a guarantor, anyone to ask, I literally had to loan a couple of thousand. I think it worked out to just under £2,000 to be able to go apply for accommodation via the non-guarantor approach.” (Estranged student)

Students and stakeholders described the difficulty in obtaining a guarantor as a barrier to securing privately rented accommodation. Some students said they had lost out on flats they were interested in, while others had been forced to move into (more expensive) student accommodation as some institutions did not require a guarantor for their own accommodation.

“I was quite close to getting [a flat], but as soon as they got my paperwork and I had ticked the form saying I didn't have a guarantor, they were like, 'We can't have you', because whatever reason - I don't remember the reason. I told them that I would pay the rent in advance, but they said that they just don't want to take the risk or something like that.” (Estranged student)

In lieu of a parent to act as a guarantor, several students said they had used a relative or friend/partner’s relative. Students gave the impression that they were reliant on their connections with individuals to navigate the guarantor process. Some also noted discomfort in having to rely on individuals around them who were not their parents.

“I was very fortunate to have my [relatives]. Had that not been the case, I probably wouldn't have this flat. I probably wouldn't have gotten into halls last year. It would have been a whole different ballgame.” (Estranged student)

“I think that would be really hard for me to find somebody that would [be a guarantor], because I wouldn't like to put my [relative] in that position. It's not really her responsibility.” (Estranged student)

Some Scottish universities have established their own guarantorship schemes to support students who do not have someone to act as a guarantor. Stakeholders and named contacts highlighted how these schemes varied considerably by institution in terms of whether they applied only to an institution's own accommodation versus those rented privately; the level of rent which they guaranteed; whether students on joint tenancies were covered; whether the number of guarantorships were limited; and whether estranged students were defined as a priority group for guarantorships.

Amongst students studying at institutions with guarantorship schemes in place, there was mixed awareness of these schemes. Some knew their institution offered this and had researched it before attending the university, whilst others were unaware that this sort of support existed. Despite the existence of these institutional guarantorship schemes, none of the students interviewed mentioned having successfully used their university as a guarantor. The key limitation identified by students was that often they only applied to institutions' own accommodation rather than private rentals.

“The university said that they're able to be your guarantor within university accommodation, but outside of that, they're not able to do anything to help, other than advising us on charities or something that do guarantorship or something like that. All of the charities and stuff that they've pointed me in the direction to still need a guarantor, so it's not really helpful anyway.” (Estranged student)

Students noted that the restrictions of institutional guarantorship schemes rendered them useless for most living situations: monthly rent maximums did not cover the average prices of accommodation in cities, such as Edinburgh and Aberdeen, and the types of tenancy agreements covered by institutions were not the type commonly used in the private sector, e.g., students were not able to use them for joint tenancies.

“[Not having a guarantor] means students who are estranged and might have found support of a unit for the first time ever in their life, a group of friends who love them and care for them and support them, and they want to live with them and have that almost a family they have chosen while in education. They can't access that because the university won't support them to access that kind of tenancy.” (Stakeholder)

For those who had tried to access institutional guarantorships, some reported that despite having a scheme in place, their institution was unable to help as they did not have sufficient supply for the number of students needing this support. One student explained that their institution suspended applications before they were able to apply, due to high demand.

The Scottish Government has committed to explore whether a programme of guarantorship can be created in partnership with colleges and universities to assist those students who are unable to provide a guarantor. Students, stakeholders and

named contacts were largely supportive of this idea. Students highlighted potential benefits in terms of physical and mental support. Stakeholders also emphasised the importance of improving institutional guarantorship schemes for increasing estranged students' feelings of stability and normality.

"I think it would also be so much easier for estranged students to leave the toxic environments they're in." (Estranged student)

"I think it would make a big difference. I think it would take a lot of stress off people, and it wouldn't, yes, it wouldn't be a worry that they're going to get kicked out of their home because they can't pay rent one month." (Estranged student)

Both students and stakeholders felt that more could be done to promote the help currently available to students regarding institutional guarantorship. However, promotion is tied in with funding and the types of guarantor schemes universities are able to offer. Therefore, they emphasised that existing schemes would need to be adequately funded to be able to cope with any demand that arises from better promotion.

"I would love to be able to actually promote our guarantor scheme really loud to all our students, but because we're restricted to number of places in our own accommodation, we don't support external private accommodation, we don't promote it." (University named contact)

"I think the advantage of that would probably be that students would be more aware of it if the university specifically offers it. I know that my university, I think, actually does that, but it's not as out in the open, like you have to look for it a bit more. I think if students knew about this, then perhaps students who aren't estranged at the moment, for example, but are in really bad living situations, might feel more secure in knowing that they have somewhere safe to move out to." (Estranged student)

A key area for improvement raised by many students and stakeholders related to broadening institutional guarantorship to better support estranged students to access cheaper private sector housing.

"I think it would be a lot better for students if it was in private. I think nine times out of ten, student accommodation is so much more expensive than private renting. I think if they were to do guarantorship all over university accommodation, it wouldn't really help in my experience." (Estranged student)

Among stakeholders and named contacts there was a real appetite for a standardised and universal institutional guarantor scheme, potentially one which replicates current private guarantor schemes but without the charges associated with those.

“I think for a scheme like this, it shouldn't rely on the differences of individual institutions. It should be a national thing if at all possible.”
(Stakeholder)

Some stakeholders and named contacts suggested simplifying the process, for example by linking SAAS funding applications to any future guarantor scheme to ensure students do not have to submit multiple sets of documentation. One stakeholder called for institutional guarantorship schemes to be extended beyond graduation (ensuring that all the necessary requirements can be fulfilled) to support students into the next phase of their life.

3.3.5 Homelessness

Just over half students (n=13) had been homeless at some point, while a further five said they had been at risk of becoming homeless (n=5). Stakeholders and named contacts frequently highlighted the high rates of homelessness among estranged students. The threat of becoming homeless was a key contributor to students' poor mental health (see Section 3.5) and impacted significantly on academic attainment and drop out (see Section 3.4).

Often students had become homeless at the point at which they became estranged. In several cases, students said they were made homeless while still at school. Some students described how both the mental and physical impacts of homelessness had a knock-on effect on their studies.

“I moved and I got screwed over, so I became homeless, which wasn't so great. I had to stop studying actually... two months after the start of the course, I stopped because I was homeless. I couldn't afford food. I couldn't find accommodation or a job. All my savings, I had used. That was very difficult to do on my own and I didn't start studying again until the next year.” (Estranged student)

Experiences of homelessness varied. Some spent weeks (or in some cases years) couch-surfing, often moving between friend's houses, or friend's parents' houses. Students spoke of how this impacted on their personal relationships and feelings of housing insecurity. Those who were able to stay with friends when they needed somewhere temporary to live expressed discomfort with taking advantage of these relationships.

“I lived in a lot of places from September to that summer, and yes, it kind of affected me a lot because I was only 16/17 at the time, and that insecurity of not knowing where you're going to go next was... It was quite stressful because I just slept on people's couches or if they had a spare room or something, but of course you can't overstay your welcome.” (Estranged student)

Among those who had not experienced homelessness, the threat of it caused high levels of anxiety. These students could become reliant on certain relationships with partners, friends or relatives to keep them from becoming homeless, making them feel more vulnerable.

“When my boyfriend and I split up and we were living together, I just felt like this sudden immediate like hopelessness, like I all of a sudden had to get my life together and I didn’t know where I was going. [...] I was really worried that I wasn’t going to find somewhere.” (Estranged student)

In several cases, students had no option but to enter emergency homeless accommodation in hostels and shelters, often without any of their belongings if they had fled an abusive situation at home. Students spoke of how unsafe they felt in these shelters and how difficult it was to continue with their studies while living there.

“I got a place in a youth hostel, which I was there for about a month until there was issues in the hostel, they had to move me for my safety, and then I was at another hostel for about eight months, I think, before I moved in with my partner.” (Estranged student)

As mentioned in the previous section (3.2.4), several students accrued debt whilst staying in homeless accommodation which exacerbated feelings of financial insecurity. One student accrued debts of thousands of pounds after being charged £300 per week for emergency accommodation. Named contacts noted some students were accessing discretionary funds to repay these debts. Students spoke of the difficulties of trying to be rehoused through the council, and the length of time this took.

“I was homeless for about like 2 years, different addresses, staying there for 2 months and 1 month there, 2 weeks there. It took a long time for the council to house me and it’s just...you just feel like you’re lost in the system.” (Estranged student)

Several interviewees noted that being a full-time student acted as a barrier to accessing accommodation. Students reported being denied housing support from the council due to them being in full-time education, with the expectation they would receive help through their institution.

“I was homeless for a year and a half I think, almost a year and a half, staying with my friend for a whole year and then I didn’t really get much support at all. I would say even like housing wise I never got support, money wise I never got support and that’s all due to me being a full-time student...So the council they wouldn’t help me with money or housing etcetera because I was a full-time student.” (Estranged student)

Yet students who had tried to access housing support through their institution also complained of a lack of support. While they could be offered university owned accommodation, there was still an expectation they would have to pay for this. Stakeholders and named contacts noted how estranged students are prone to falling through the cracks in the system.

“We have emergency accommodation...but if we house the young person in emergency accommodation, then they fall down the points system in the local authority for their own social house, which is a really crazy situation where, if we try to support the young person in the long term, it'll be to their detriment because they won't have a stable home...Then the young person is just stuck, essentially, in accommodation where they may be being charged student accommodation at a discounted rate, or they may not have their own permanent home. There's just no stability. There's no permanency in it. The whole system really, I think there are huge cracks that estranged people, particularly young people, fall through.”
(University named contact)

3.3.6 Improving accommodation support for estranged students

Interviewees identified several main areas of improvement to accommodation support. Students and named contacts felt that SAAS funding should be increased to cover rent whilst leaving sufficient funds for living costs. They also suggested that the provision of year-round accommodation could be extended across institutions, and anxiety around this could be reduced through ensuring students did not have to move between rooms in institutions where 365-days-a year guarantees already exist.

A key area of improvement related to ways to improve institutional guarantorship schemes, which included:

- Creating a nationally standardised scheme so that support is uniform across institutions
- Increasing the promotion and resourcing of schemes so that they are able to meet demands
- Extending support to better cover students renting in the private sector
- Simplifying administrative processes with the possibility to link guarantorship to a SAAS funding award; and
- Extending guarantorship support beyond graduation so that students retain housing stability once they are no longer studying.

Other suggested improvements included:

- Offering estranged students more information regarding their housing options when they join the institution
- Providing funds to assist with travel costs as estranged students were often living further away from their institution due to the housing being cheaper; and
- Supporting students to secure housing post-graduation.

3.4. Impact of estrangement on educational transitions, attainment and progression

Our research indicated that estranged students from both further and higher education institutions (FE and HE) were impacted by their estrangement at every key milestone in the student journey. This section explores how estrangement impacted on academic transitions (from secondary school, to college and university, and after graduation), attainment and drop out.

3.4.1 Attainment during school

For many students, estrangement occurred while they were at secondary school which impacted on their education in a number of ways. There were students who had left school early with 'minimum qualifications' as a result of having to leave the family home and find somewhere to live. Others stayed on for S5 and S6 to complete Highers and Advanced Highers but spoke about being unable to concentrate on their studies due to worrying about what was going on at home. This negatively affected their grades and impacted on students' ability to access their preferred course or institution. Some students had missed their conditional offers for university when their grades dropped around the time of their estrangement.

"I think it affected my grades massively because I was just upset and gutted, and so I couldn't really focus on my exams. I went from being predicted four As and a B Advanced Higher, to getting an A, a B, and two fails. It completely devastated me." (Estranged student)

However, there were also students who used schoolwork as a distraction from their home life and described school as a "sanctuary" or "safe space" from abusive situations at home. Students said they were motivated to do well at school with the aim of attending university or college as a way to escape their home situation, while others felt continued study was the only option open to them. Some spoke about achieving top grades in their Highers, while there were others who aimed to achieve just enough to get into university or college.

"I used it as a focus to kind of forget everything else, if that makes sense, so I really did make a lot of effort for my exams. I had to." (Estranged student)

3.4.2 Transitions to further or higher education

The estranged students who participated in the research had a range of educational trajectories. Many went from S6 directly into a degree, while others had gone on to FE from school, working their way up from National Qualifications to HNC/Ds and then on to degrees. Some students in their 20s and 30s had returned to education after years spent working or raising families and worked their way up.

For those who entered university directly from S6, it was common for estrangement to have occurred in the summer between the end of school and university, after students had received their university offers. Among those who enrolled in FE

courses after leaving school or returned to college later in life, this was often to make up for qualifications that they had not achieved at school as a result of dropping out due to estrangement.

“I left school with minimum qualifications, so I knew that I had to go back into college to get those qualifications to go on to university.”
(Estranged student)

“I didn’t get the right grade in high school, so I done maths again in college and then I ended up doing another year in college again doing the HNC and then from there I got into [degree course].”
(Estranged student)

Many college students had tried several courses before deciding on a subject that they liked, which one estranged student explained was a result of the need to find out who they were. Others explained they had been forced by parents to study subjects that they had not wished to and decided to change course after their estrangement. For one student, changing to a course their parents did not approve of had been a factor in their estrangement.

Some students opted for an alternative route through their qualification than their grades allowed for. There were examples of students with an HNC/D choosing to enter first year of a degree at university rather than articulate into the second or third year. Students said they wished to have a less stressful educational experience while dealing with the ramifications of estrangement, such as a financial worry and housing issues. However, the financial implications of accruing an additional years’ student debt were not raised.

“[...] they were like, 'Oh, you can do direct entry into second year,' but because of my situation, I was like, 'I'm just going to have an easy year and not go head first into the second year.'” (Estranged student)

Experiences of estrangement impacted on students in different ways. There were students who said they coped well with the transition from school to college or university, reporting that their circumstances had prepared them for the independence that was required in further or higher education. For those who coped less well, there was a prevalent theme of isolation and feelings of not fitting in due to lack of finances and being the only one they knew without family support.

“I’ve always been independent. I’ve never really been able to rely on my family, so I don’t think it hit me...the transition itself wasn’t as difficult.” (Estranged student)

“The transition period was definitely quite difficult because I definitely started comparing myself to everyone around me. They were buying fancy alcohol and going to clubs and doing all this fun stuff, going to dinner together, [...]. I didn't even have bedding because I couldn't afford it, so I just slept with my jacket.” (Estranged student)

3.4.3 Attainment at university or college

It was common for estranged students to express that they had struggled to cope with the academic workload. In the absence of the support of parents/legal guardians/carers, the overbearing worry of money and threat of homelessness impacted FE and HE students' ability to study for their course. Estranged students that had part-time jobs to supplement their income, spoke about the stress of trying to complete their assignments while working to pay for their rent and other essentials.

For FE students, a concern was missing college to take on extra hours at work which impacted their bursaries. HE estranged students that had accessed the maximum financial support they could (SAAS loan, ISB and discretionary funding) still felt the impacts of financial worry on their academic work.

"I still need to go and work those 16 hours, and every time I do, I think those are 16 hours that could be spent studying, so it does have an impact, having a job, but I just - there's nothing more I can do. I can't afford to quit my job." (Estranged student)

"I used to be able to get merits for every single test or exam that I did. Now, I'm lucky if I even pass it because I'm just so stressed out. I'm working so much that I feel like I don't have enough time to put into my studies, but because I don't have much financial help and I've got so much to pay for, I don't have any choice but to work." (Estranged student)

Alongside financial stress, estranged students experienced mental health struggles that had developed as a result of their family background and treatment at home. Anxiety and depression were common amongst these students and often affected their focus and ability to study. There were students who were involved in ongoing criminal investigations as a result of their treatment at home, the stress of which further impacted on students ability to focus on their studies.

"That might be a good thing in the sense that I'm not reliant on my family, but it affected me very much so with my mental health and I find it quite difficult to get myself to study at times. It's just a sort of existentialist kind of thing. What's the point?" (Estranged student)

"It had a huge impact on university and on my studies because I was obviously going through quite a lot of, like I said, threatening behaviour towards me. So, I couldn't exactly sit in peace, I was always on edge [...] I had no concentration... due to everything that was going on at the time." (Estranged student)

Some estranged students interviewed were very high achievers, both at school and in FE/HE. This was often despite dealing with extreme adverse circumstances and a lack of support from academic staff who did not always understand the difficulties faced by estranged students (e.g. threatening expulsion to non-attenders). Stakeholders, named contacts and students highlighted the self-sufficiency and

motivation estranged students acquired as a result of always having to rely on themselves. This was seen as impacting on attainment and progression from school to FE/HE.

3.4.4 Drop out and interruptions to study

Despite some students displaying behaviours of self-sufficiency and high attainment, it was common for students to struggle to cope academically with the stress of managing without family support. Estranged students said they had dropped out of their courses or considered doing so, taken temporary breaks in study and repeated courses they had failed.

Those who had dropped out or taken a break did so for a variety of reasons, including homelessness, the stress of dealing with estranged parents/legal guardians/carers, financial worry, problems with funding, physical or mental health, childcare, and poor academic attainment. Often participants spoke about the overwhelming struggle of having to deal with multiple points of pressure in their lives in the absence of a family support network and how completing assignments in this situation was the last thing on their mind.

“Trying to deal with college, trying to deal with getting my stuff from [parent’s] place, obviously, trying to also deal with housing, mental health in general, that kind of thing, it all got very hard for me and then I ended up dropping out. I ended up missing quite a lot of college, because I’ve had days where I’d rather stay at home and do nothing than go into college when I just wanted to cry.” (Estranged student)

Amongst the students interviewed, there were cases of FE students being threatened with expulsion for non-attendance. Reasons for students not attending college included flare-ups of long-term health conditions, mental health challenges related to estrangement, surgery and moving accommodation. Some students reported not being believed by college staff when they tried to explain their non-attendance.

“They were constantly questioning why I’m not attending, like I’d been off for like one day when I had to move house, they took me into an office and they were like yeah, ‘if you’re off again, we’re kicking you out of this course’, you know?” (Estranged student)

There were college stakeholders who perceived taking a break from college as beneficial for students who had too much going on to focus on their studies. One stakeholder described this as a ‘positive pause’. Estranged students did not specify whether or not they perceived a break in the same way.

“Sometimes, the best thing that we can do is to support a student to make a positive pause because there’s too much going on and now is not the right time to be at college. But it’s how you facilitate that and how you manage that when quite often, our students who feel

overwhelmed, the easy thing is just to walk out the door.” (College named contact)

3.4.5 Overcoming drop out

Despite the difficulties they faced, estranged students often persevered with their studies or returned to study after taking a temporary break. Having a surrogate support system in the absence of parental support was influential in students choosing to stay on. This support system came in different forms, such as friends, institutional support staff, teaching staff, counsellors and partners.

“I was thinking of just leaving because I was like I can’t deal with it. No course was worth me literally losing my life over. [...] but after talking to my student adviser and my lecturers I managed to get through it.” (Estranged student)

“I’ve considered it multiple times, dropping out, but like I said earlier on: my classmates weren’t ever having it and they dragged me [back] kicking and screaming.” (Estranged student)

It was also common for estranged students to suggest that university or college was their only option and that they did not have any choice but to continue despite the difficulties. For these students, dropping out could result in them losing their income and, for some degree students, accommodation. Without a family home to return to, they would have been at risk of homelessness.

“I would have nothing else. I don’t have anything else but university. I don’t have any other accommodation but student accommodation. If I didn’t do this, I wouldn’t have anything, so I kind of have to stick with it.” (Estranged student)

“If college doesn’t work out for them, they always have that like fall back, they can just stay with their parents again. They can have time to be teenagers until they work out what they want to do. I didn’t have that option.” (Estranged student)

Another common motivator for persevering with their studies was the desire to ‘prove everyone wrong’ and to achieve what they considered as success in life. Sometimes this was motivated by a need to provide a better life for their children than the one they had experienced.

“Just trying to get qualifications under my belt and trying to prove everyone wrong because all my life, I have been called a failure, that I was wasting my own time, that sort of thing. So, I want to prove everyone wrong and try and get somewhere in life, I guess.” (Estranged student)

3.4.6 Thoughts and fears about graduation

Graduation was not a key focus of the research. However, some students, stakeholders and named contacts raised concerns about how estranged students may be further disadvantaged at the point of graduation.

Worry about the future and life after graduation was a prevalent theme for estranged students, some of whom expressed pain at their parent(s)/guardian(s) missing out on 'big life events' such as graduations. This suggested that estranged students were not only missing out on the security of housing and finances after graduation but also emotional support as well.

“Not having those figures to be there for you when you're going through your life achievements it is kind of a bit [____],¹ especially if you know people whose parents are super proud of them and will post pictures of them graduating and stuff and being really supportive about those things.” (Estranged student)

Alongside concerns about finding a graduate job, estranged students worried about where they were going to live and how they were going to afford necessities without student accommodation or finance, and without a family 'safety net' to rely on.

“I get quite anxious thinking about it. It's like, what then? Would I go into a full-time job to be able to pay for a flat? Would I be able to get a flat quick enough for the end before my term and my accommodation runs out? Would I actually get a job at the end of my degree? Stuff like that. It makes me quite anxious thinking about it.” (Estranged student)

These concerns were shared by university named contacts who had seen the impact that being estranged had on these students. They explained that after graduation, estranged students can get stuck in a cycle of accepting low-paid jobs in order to afford rent despite having top qualifications. This resulted in a perpetuation of living in poverty, risking homelessness and poor health.

“Often our estranged students are the ones in low-paid jobs, unskilled jobs that they have to continue as soon as they graduate because they need the money. Then they're stuck in a lower-paid job and they've got this great qualification, but they can't break the cycle. So, they're working too many hours, their health, their mental health gets affected. Much higher risk of homelessness, trying to find a deposit, guarantee schemes.” (University named contact)

Some named contacts had provided additional support to estranged students to ease the exit from full-time education into employment. This included emergency accommodation in the summer after graduation or the provision of discretionary bridging loans to assist them. Some college and university named contacts, and

¹ To note a word used in emphasis has been removed from this quote.

students, called for additional support to help them upon leaving university, particularly in relation to finances and accommodation.

“They’re about to leave university and it’s like a precipice. Students come back to me like, ‘Can I do another degree? Can I do a postgrad degree?’ Students would do a postgrad degree and then they’re like, ‘Can I do another postgrad degree?’, and I’m like, oh. What you realise is that they’re facing an absolute precipice. I know what I did when I finished uni: I moved back in with mum and dad, looked for work, etc., and had that safety net. It’s a real cliff edge coming out of where all the support is within an institution, coming out of that.” (University named contact)

3.5. Impact of estrangement on health and wellbeing

Estrangement can impact students’ health and wellbeing in a number of ways. This section includes findings on the various ways in which estrangement has affected students’ health and wellbeing both negatively and positively.

3.5.1. Negative health and wellbeing impacts

As described in section 3.1, there were students who were estranged because their relationship with parents/legal guardians/carers was strained, abusive, violent or destructive. The trauma experienced as a result of these relationships can be longlasting and can impact negatively on an individual’s mental health, as was the case among some of the older interviewees who were in their 30s. Students reported experiencing depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-harm, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts as a result of the trauma experienced while living with their family. For some, the full impact of this trauma was only felt once they had left the family home and it affected both students’ mental and physical health.

“Mentally it has affected me because I do suffer from depression and anxiety which I didn’t before...now I’m out of that trauma, it hits you more if that makes sense...now you’re out of it, you kind of think about it more and it gets to you more. So yeah, depression is a big one and anxiety.” (Estranged student)

In addition to the mental health impacts of trauma, estrangement also made students feel isolated and alone. While students were relieved to have escaped their situation at home, they still felt a sense of loss of no longer having a family to provide them with emotional support. Isolation and loneliness was exacerbated for students where estrangement from parents/guardians had resulted in isolation from other family members, such as siblings still living at home. Students felt alone in negotiating life without the “safety net” of a family to fall back on in times of difficulty which placed further strain on their mental health.

“It just felt like really I was on my own with everything that I do. That feeling, it weighs down on you and it builds stress that you just can’t let out anywhere...You know everything you do depends on you, and only yourself. It’s, yes, it’s basically like that, like walking a

tightrope, but knowing that there's no safety nets underneath if you fall. It's kind of scary actually.” (Estranged student)

“It’s been difficult to accept myself that I have no one to say like...no one to share anything, Mother’s Day or Father’s Day and I have no one to call a brother or sister. It’s like a blank space, I feel like a lot has been lost.” (Estranged student)

It was not just the lack of emotional support from family that affected estranged students mental health. Students were also impacted by not having parents/guardians around to teach them practical life skills to help them learn to live independently. Without family support, there were estranged students who found it harder to do practical tasks such as setting up bills or applying for funding. This put more strain on individuals which negatively impacted on their mental health. There were some students who received practical support from their college or university but this was not the case for all.

Living without the support of family and having to fend for themselves, impacted on estranged students ability to form relationships. There were students who had become used to only relying on themselves that said they found it hard to open up and trust others. Some also found it difficult to connect with and relate to other students because their experience of family was so different. Students did not always want to disclose their estrangement. This led to them avoiding situations where family may be mentioned, or lying about their family relationships, thus impacting on their mental health and adding to feelings of loneliness.

“I think the biggest problem was that I'd never felt mental health problems so heavily before, so because I didn't have anyone, I was alone and nobody really understood what I was going through because I wasn't telling them what was going on. Still, a lot of people in my life don't even know that I'm estranged. I'm too embarrassed to tell them I don't speak to my parents. I feel like I'm living up to this lie and telling them, 'Yes, my mum and dad are fine. We did this', but we didn't really do anything, but I just don't want to look like I've changed so much, especially with my high school friends. I feel like I don't want, I don't know, I don't want to look like I'm struggling, so I cover it all.” (Estranged student)

“I think the estrangement, overall, I think it's harder to connect with people who don't share the same experience. People tend to rely on their families quite a lot, for good reason. When you don't have that, it's hard to relate to that, and it feels a bit weird.” (Estranged student)

Overall, there were many ways in which estrangement made life challenging for students and the cumulative negative affect this had on their mental health. Students, named contacts and stakeholders all agreed that estrangement impacted on all aspects of their life and coping with multiple stresses and anxieties eroded their resilience and overall mental health.

“Just the situation that estranged students are in on many levels very, very often does affect their mental health and exacerbates their mental health. If you don't know where your rent is coming from, you don't know how you're going to pay for food, you know. That affects their mental health, as well as the very often very traumatic circumstances that they have left behind. They will encounter situations that will trigger those again and again over the course of their education journey. Very often they start whichever course that they're starting, but they have no medical diagnosis of say depression or stress or anxiety. How can they then access the support that is available to them? They haven't got that medical testament that actually says that they can officially access that, so there's all of that.” (Stakeholder)

3.5.2. Positive impacts of estrangement

While estrangement had a number of negative impacts on students, there were students and stakeholders who believed there were some positive aspects that came from being estranged. There were students who felt estrangement was positive because it meant they had escaped a toxic or abusive environment. While students continued to live with the mental impact of having lived in that environment, they felt that was preferable than if they had not left. There were also examples of students' feeling stronger and more resilient as a result of what they have lived through and could see their mental health improving as a result of leaving traumatic environments.

“The stress of it [estrangement] is definitely high, but then again, in a sense, it's also like being estranged makes it easier because of how my family was in general...I would say estrangement, in some cases, and in some ways, can be good for a person. If you have a really poor family, as in like how you're treated and how things go in that household, then being away from that is a massive relief.” (Estranged student)

“Definitely makes me stronger person, which is another reason why I can be proud of myself, that I know that I can actually overcome nearly any difficulty in my life. After what I've been through, I can say that.” (Estranged student)

With estrangement, students also experienced a sense of freedom, not only from challenging relationships, but a freedom to be themselves and make choices without judgement or criticism. This was the case for students who became estranged because their parents/guardians did not approve of their sexual preferences, gender identity, religious beliefs or lifestyle. This was also true for students who felt controlled while living with their parents/guardians. For some, this resulted in greater self-acceptance and improvements to their self-esteem.

“Positive, I feel so much more sane...I haven't got anybody in my life putting me down for the way I look or what I do with my life or anything like that. I feel like I'm less judged. I feel like I can do what I

want, and I feel like making decisions is easier now because I don't feel like there are going to be consequences or if there are, I'm not going to be harshly judged for them. I'm still struggling with my self-image and stuff because of the trauma but I think getting away from them I feel a lot better about myself and I feel much more comfortable in my own skin which is nice." (Estranged student)

Becoming more independent was another positive aspect of estrangement. Independence was forced on some before they felt ready for it and learning to be independent was challenging. However, on reflection, students felt it was positive that they had learned to look after themselves. There were students who had developed independent living skills while living at home because they had caring responsibilities. Already possessing these skills meant the transition to living independently of their family was slightly easier.

"There's not a lot of positives to being estranged to be honest, apart from maybe learning to have more autonomy. Learning to become more self-supporting and stuff. You kind of get forced to do stuff that maybe your peers will be, say, too lazy to do because they are like, 'I'm not going to fill in this form because my dad was going to do it for me.' I can't do that, so I have to do it myself." (Estranged student)

Finally, there were students for whom estrangement was transformative. Estranged students felt that what they had been through, both before and after estrangement had changed them in a number of positive ways. They felt the experience had taught them a lot about themselves and the strength and maturity they had gained. They also said they had become more empathetic and generally a better person as a result of their estrangement and the hardship they experienced.

"I think I've changed as a person. I've become so much more understanding and, honestly, I feel like I've become a nicer person. I used to be quite nasty and stuck in that high school mindset, I guess, of being really judgmental of people and stuff. Now that I've been put in that situation, I'm actually really grateful to be put in this, although that is stressful. I would say, nowadays, I am a lot happier, I guess. The stress will always be there, but I know that dwelling on it doesn't do anything to help it." (Estranged student)

"It's made me realise a lot about...what happiness is and like what truly being happy is and having good connections and it's made me learn like what to look for, for good friendships and relationships and like the challenges that I've overcome have made me a lot stronger as a person. I've had to do a lot of work to get myself to where I am now, and I can happily look back and be like I did that. I've learnt a lot about myself and my mental health and yeah, my attachment style and it's definitely made me a lot more grateful for things and made me mature. So those are some of the positive sides to it, I guess." (Estranged student)

3.5.3. Health and wellbeing support

Estranged students' experiences of accessing support for their mental health and wellbeing were varied. There were those who chose not to access support for their mental health because they did not want to tell people about their estrangement and preferred to deal with things on their own. There were also those who did not know that mental health and wellbeing support was available via colleges and universities. Students generally found out about the support available when they disclosed their estrangement to someone in the college or university. Disclosures often arose because the mental health of students was impacting their ability to engage sufficiently in their studies or had reached crisis point.

For those who tried to access support, not all were successful. There were estranged students who described being on a waiting list for support but did not receive support.

Those who had accessed support reported differing experiences. There were students who were very positive about the mental health support they received from their college or university and who were supported in a range of ways, including: counselling, mental health check-ins with wellbeing advisors, and peer support groups.

“The college was very, very supportive and all the four years I've been using the counselling, the school services, which was very, very helpful. Actually, helped me to finally be okay with myself, so yes. Also, helped me with the stress, which is also, it's associated with the studies.” (Estranged student)

“Once I found out about all this and got myself on the radar for the wellbeing support at the university, they're so on the ball with all of this. They know that not having that support, not having that, you know, just those people to rely on that you're supposed to have to rely on, is going to have an impact on your mental health and your wellbeing. I think that's why they're so good at, you know, 'We have these drop-ins. You know where to find us if you need a chat. How are you doing?' Doing these check-ins and things, really just giving you as many opportunities to open up if you need that. It has such an impact.” (Estranged student)

However, while students were appreciative of the support on offer from colleges and universities, they did not always find that the support helped. There were students who felt their mental health was negatively affected by financial or accommodation stress or from loneliness. Therefore, support such as counselling, did not do anything to resolve the cause of their distress.

“I did receive mental health help from the university when I was starting to develop some scary symptoms, but that was because of everything building up...the university gave me six weeks of telephone counselling...All the support I would receive, it was almost like it didn't actually do anything because it didn't get rid of that underlying cause of all the troubles that I knew were going on.” (Estranged student)

Some students, stakeholders and named contacts also highlighted the limitations of institutional counselling services, both in terms of the number of sessions offered and the type of support provided. They noted that these tend to focus more on anxiety relating to exams rather than complex trauma associated with experiences of estrangement. This had led some students to fund their own therapy privately.

“University therapy that is given out is not helpful at all. They offer six sessions, and it is free, but it's not for mental health, it's for if you're struggling with uni and if you're having trouble managing workload and stuff. I remember going to them and saying I have this trauma, and them saying, 'We can't help you'. [...] Going through the NHS, it was more like that where it was just talking therapies, self-help. Going to trauma therapies, like I said, a lot of them are full. A lot of them, they have a lot of long-term patients, so there's not many openings. You kind of have to turn to private therapies because no one else will take you on.” (Estranged student)

“We've had quite a few students who have been told by university services that their mental health needs are too complex for their counselling services who are really there to deal with exam anxiety and stress, not Post Traumatic Stress caused by childhood neglect that ends up retriggered as they're going through their studies.” (Stakeholder)

Students also reported accessing support for their mental health from independent and/or specialist services outside of their college or university. These included: private and NHS counsellors/psychologists, third sector mental health support and specialised trauma support. Sometimes students were referred to these services by college or university staff to enable students to access more specialist services that were not available within colleges and universities. There were also support services provided to students by external organisations within the college or university setting which were commissioned by the institutions. Overall, mental health support provided by external agencies, independent of colleges and universities, was viewed positively by students.

“Yes so I had a suicide attempt and I managed to get a counsellor with [name of organisation] and he was fantastic, I'm no longer having sessions but I feel so much better than where I was before I started speaking to him.” (Estranged student)

3.5.4. Improvements to institutional mental health support

Overall, estranged students felt the mental health support available to students needed to improve. Even those who had a positive experience of accessing support, both within institutions and externally, felt there was not enough support available, or available quickly, to sufficiently support everyone who needed it. There was also a sense that the support available within colleges and universities was not appropriate at addressing the issues that estranged students were facing. Students reported a need for more trauma informed counselling in particular. While there were instances of students accessing trauma informed support from services

outwith colleges and universities, these services often had cost implications for students which made them less accessible.

There was a view that support provided to estranged students would benefit from college and university staff having a greater understanding of the causes of estrangement and the broad ways in which estrangement can affect students' mental health. There were students who felt that unless the causes of their stress or anxiety were understood and addressed then their mental health would not improve. Both teaching and support staff require a greater awareness and understanding of estrangement to ensure students are able to access support as soon as it is required. A greater understanding of estrangement and the impact it has on students would also enable colleges and universities to ensure that appropriate support is available, either within the institution or by referral to external services. Students specifically mentioned the need for staff who are trained to support students at risk of self-harm and suicide.

"I know it would be really hard, because a lot of funding for mental health is obviously not very good right now, but see if they could find a way to fund therapy for trauma specifically. I think that would really help. When I was looking myself to find therapies, I just kept coming to a dead end. I always wanted just to give up and thought that I was just going to feel this way forever and there wasn't going to be help for me. If it wasn't for my [partner's] mum helping me actually find them, I don't think I would have been motivated to do it." (Estranged student)

"The knock-on additional mental health support needs that this group of students might have as a result of that and the provision for that isn't always there as well. Also there seems to be with young people who are maybe coming to the University an understanding that they are estranged at the point of application. There isn't necessarily any local authority or social work support backing that young person up. They can be very alone in the world when they get to us. That puts a lot of pressure on for example their accommodation situation." (University named contact)

On the whole, the students who accessed support through their college or university only became aware that support was available once they disclosed their estrangement to someone at the college or university. Disclosure primarily came about because a student was failing to attend classes or submit assignments. Estranged students would like to see colleges and universities being more proactive in advertising what mental health support is available to estranged students so they can get support quicker and without having to seek it out. In addition to greater promotion of support, students would like information on the eligibility criteria for support to be clearer and easier for students to understand.

"I was diagnosed with an eating disorder last year and through that I had to make my professors and my tutors and stuff aware of my situation, and one of them did reach out and tell me that there are

measures in place, people to talk to, therapy that you can access through university. Not just for this; for other things, and then be put in the direction of them, so that's how I was made aware of it...But I think it should be made aware to us from the straight get-go when we join university, because I think especially being estranged from your parents can manifest...The longer you leave issues, the worse it gets. I think if you're told about it straight off, the quicker you can start dealing with it." (Estranged student)

"I think having better support, having better guidelines out there for what qualifies or what doesn't qualify, and different options of money and stuff, so it's looking at more things an estranged student goes through and understand the things like help with mental health. If a student is estranged from family for say, abusive reasons like I am, they're going to have days where they physically do not want to leave the house because they're just that depressed or they're that anxious or they're scared of their lives that much." (Estranged student)

3.6. Institutional responses to estrangement

This section explores colleges and universities' responses to estrangement. It considers the institutional support available to students, the extent to which students were aware of that support, and students' experiences of accessing this. It concludes with a discussion of how institutional support for students could be improved.

3.6.1 Support available to estranged students

Stakeholders, named contacts and students identified a wide range of financial, accommodation and pastoral support currently on offer in Scottish colleges and universities. These included:

- **Financial support:** signposting to sources of financial support, such as notifying students of bursaries, scholarships, or other funding options they might be eligible for; discretionary and hardship funding; support with travel costs; assistance paying back debts such as rent arrears, utilities, and nursery payments; payment of rent; support to access the Childcare Allowance and support with childcare costs; financial support to help move into new accommodation; ringfenced funding for estranged students; bursaries and scholarships for estranged students, sometimes along with other disadvantaged groups; foodbank vouchers; topping up FE bursaries with discretionary funding; priority for discretionary funding
- **Accommodation support:** access to guarantorships; 365 days a year accommodation; discounted accommodation; assistance with accommodation costs from discretionary funds (e.g. paying rent)
- **Pastoral support:** access to counselling; provision of menstrual items; contact details for support workers; free gym membership; coffee vouchers; ability to self-certificate absences

- **Academic support:** extra days off where needed; additional time to complete assignments; help with personal statements while at college; laptops; provision of stationery or course materials; encouragement and verbal support
- **Institution wide approaches:** making estranged students part of corporate parenting policy; offering estranged students adjusted offers as part of contextual admissions.

The types and breadth of support provided varied considerably across institutions. Where institution-wide approaches had been adopted such as making estranged students part of an institution's corporate parenting policy, provision for estranged students appeared more comprehensive and consistent. Although some literature highlights the variations in discretionary funding offered by institutions, there is little which explores the range of support provided in colleges and universities to estranged students ([Scottish Government, 2017](#)).

3.6.2 Estranged students' awareness of support

Most of the universities, and some colleges, attended by the estranged students participating in this research had dedicated pages for estranged students on their websites. However, many students had little knowledge or awareness of the types of support they could access through their institution. The discretionary nature of institutional support, and the fact that institutions tended to assess students' needs on a case by case basis meant that unless students had had dealings with a named contact, they had little knowledge as to the breadth and levels of support on offer from their institution.

In particular, awareness of the existence of named contacts was low among estranged students from both colleges and universities. This included some vulnerable students (e.g. trans students, disabled students and student parents) who were experiencing significant hardship, and who would have benefitted from the support. Some estranged students found out about named contacts from their friends or from other estranged students. A student who had been couch surfing explained how they first heard:

“[The university wasn't aware] until I got to the end of second year, I think, because I had no idea that this was a thing you could bring to university. In my head I was like, oh, I had no concept of a university having a duty of care. [...] So, it was literally my friend and she was ringing, like, 'I found this person's email. Email them and make an appointment and tell them about your situation. It can do so much.'”
(Estranged student)

Two students (one in college and a second at university) had notified their institutions they were estranged before starting their course and were consequently able to access higher levels of support, particularly in terms of funding, but also accommodation. In one case, the student had been put in touch with their named contact by their headteacher. More commonly, students found out about named

contacts further into their course. Several students said they felt reassured the support was there, but that they had not felt the need to approach them.

“Also having the uni aware, it didn't really make much of a difference in terms of lectures and I've never really needed to make an appeal for additional time for assessments or anything, but I know I'm on the radar. I have monthly meetings come through from the wellbeing support team like, 'We're having a drop-in on this day. How are you doing?' It's nice to know that there's no pressure to talk about it, but they're there if I need to.” (Estranged student)

3.6.3 Estranged students' experiences of accessing support

Among those who had been in touch with their institutional named contact, students were very positive about the support they received, noting how they felt less anxious as a result.

“I think knowing that [the university] had things in place for this, I think it eased anxieties about where I was going to sleep, if I was actually going to get an education. When it happens it's just kind of like, does it stop here? Is this it? What are you supposed to do? You never really have a plan, and I think what [named contact] does just kind of reassures you that it's not just going to stop there, there is other options.” (Estranged student)

While students were often reluctant to declare themselves as estranged to their institution (see Section 3.1.3), if they did they were more likely to approach teaching staff such as lecturers or personal tutors than named contacts. This was partly because few were aware of named contacts, but also because students had existing relationships with their lecturers and felt they could trust them. Students' experiences of accessing support via this route was variable. There were students who said staff had not been able to assist them with their problems which often related to finance and housing. Others felt it had not made any difference or that staff had not understood the challenges faced by estranged students. By contrast, there were students who spoke of how helpful lecturers had been in terms of directing them to additional support, arranging for them to have extensions or making exceptions for their attendance records. Some credited their lecturers with keeping them in their studies after they considered dropping out.

“The college lecturers themselves have been absolutely amazing throughout the year. They've been very patient with me. They've been very patient in terms of not handing work in at the right time or not having the work handed in. They've been a great support to me.” (Estranged student)

3.6.4 Improving institutional support for estranged students

The majority of universities, and a large proportion of colleges, in Scotland have named contacts, who provide tailored support to estranged students. This research found students were often unaware of support, especially named contacts,

highlighting the need for increased promotion of services for estranged students. Having dedicated websites for estranged students is helpful. However, this only works if students have enough awareness of the term 'estrangement', know that colleges and universities offer additional support to estranged students, and are able to find and/or search for it on their institutions's website. Although some universities and colleges offered significant amounts of additional support to estranged students, students felt the onus was on them to self-declare in order to access support, with students often only aware of support after they had disclosed. Students called for institutions to be more proactive in how they reach out to those who are estranged, particularly at the start of courses. They suggested colleges and universities could mention estrangement in course introductions or send emails to all students encouraging them to come forward.

"I think, instead of you having to tell the university, I think the university should tell you - send out a mass email to everybody, including stuff for estranged students, students who go through other things as well, like care experienced students. I think they should just send it out to everyone because I think it's better to have it there, instead of you having to go and look for it. I think, making everybody aware, even if they're estranged or not, about it would be great, because I'm sure there are other people like me who are too shy to admit that they're estranged." (Estranged student)

Students liked the idea of drop in sessions, where they could meet with someone if they needed to. Several also suggested it would be useful to meet with other estranged students as a way to reduce their sense of isolation and talk with someone who could relate to their experiences. Few students had met other estranged students but those who had found it useful.

"It would actually be kind of nice like for there to be some sort of support group or like peer thing where I could meet other students that have been through similar things, because like I don't know anyone...that's what can be very isolating when you're like the only one." (Estranged student)

Students and named contacts from colleges and universities called for the need to improve awareness, amongst teaching staff, of the challenges estranged students face. There was also a view that college and university staff, including teaching staff, needed to do more to check in with their students to see how they are coping. Staff training was seen as critical to improving outcomes for estranged students.

"I think maybe just trying to understand everybody's personal circumstances, because I think that [teaching staff] forget a lot of the time that a lot of people are distanced from their parents or have really [____]² relationships and they think that everybody is just going to university or college with this perfect life and the only thing they have to stress about is deadlines. No. Most students are living

² To note a word used in emphasis has been removed from this quote.

on their own, haven't got any support from anybody. They're working part-time to try to take overtime as much as they can to pay rent, to get food. I literally know friends who are living off of tins. It's not just deadlines that we're stressing about. It's everything else. So, imagine dealing with all of that and then you have somebody telling you, 'Oh by the way this isn't actually that good' and you know that you can't really say anything to them because then you just look like you're complaining." (Estranged student)

"It's about raising awareness amongst the wider institution and staff and the impact, because quite often... Our care experienced work is well established in the college, and quite often, I'll have lecturers saying, 'Oh, they're just a typical teenager', and you're like, 'Well yes, they are a typical teenager. However, there is also x, y and z going on, which means...' So, I think it's that raising awareness, because then we need to come together as an institution. It's not just about student support, providing support or counselling; it's about the college, similar to being a corporate parent. It's everybody. Everybody has a responsibility." (College named contact)

More widely, stakeholders and named contacts in this research called for the need to bring estranged students under the corporate parenting legislation, similar to those with care experience, as a means of ensuring students receive consistent support across institutions.

"Including estranged students in the groups, as one of the cohorts which requires statutory support, would basically massively ramp up college and university engagement with the issue, and massively improve the way they engage with the problem. They would have to, they would be legally obliged to do so, and they would be failing on their corporate parenting responsibilities if they did not." (Stakeholder)

"For me, I think any gaps would be the fact that it's not something that we are legally obliged to do. I don't think the gaps are our making. I think if they were given parity of esteem with our care experienced students, then I think that would change the landscape quite significantly. Wouldn't make it perfect, but it would give us more... It would give us more power, I suppose, to be able to make changes." (College named contact)

4. Discussion

The aim of this research was to provide an insight into the contexts and experiences of estranged students studying at college and university in Scotland, and to draw out learning from these findings to inform future policy and improve the provision of support for estranged students. This section will summarise the key findings from the research and discuss the implications of these findings.

4.1. Key findings

Reasons and contexts of estrangement

Reasons for estrangement were varied but echoed those identified in previous research including: difficult relationships with biological/step parents; physical, emotional and sexual abuse; clashes of values regarding sexuality, gender identity, cultural/ethnic background; students' responsibilities as young carers; parental addiction; and threats of forced marriage. It is important to note that intersectionality was evident in the student sample, with many reporting that they were, for example, in disabled, LGBTQI+, trans and ethnic minority categories. It was also evident that intersectionality amplified the experiences estranged students encountered, with those who were trans, disabled, from ethnic minorities and student parents particularly disadvantaged as a result of facing additional challenges.

Finances

Without parents/legal guardians to provide financial support, the fear of not having enough money to live off was acute and impacted on estranged students' already fragile mental health. Financial hardship was common among the students. We interviewed students who reported that they lived off overdrafts, regularly used food banks, went without food, or were unable to furnish their accommodation. This was especially the case for those who were assessed by Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) according to their parent's/legal guardian's/carer's income before they disclosed they were estranged (receiving lower/minimum loans and no bursary) and those who received no SAAS support (either as a result of being ineligible or because they were reluctant to take on debt). Some further education (FE) students noted their bursaries had been reduced, either because they went to work where they could earn more, or because they were struggling to cope with the impacts of being estranged and found it difficult to attend classes.

Income was often insufficient to cover essentials, let alone the wider 'student experience'. Even those who supplemented the maximum SAAS loan and bursary/FE bursary with discretionary funding, employment and scholarships, still struggled to meet their day to day living costs, largely due to the high cost of accommodation. Students expressed concerns about: student loan debt, the impact of the cost of living crisis and the need to support dependents, including estranged siblings and their own children. Paid work was considered a necessity by the majority of interviewees, with some working very long hours. During the summer, this was the only option of funding available to students. However, they noted the

lack of job opportunities and the stress caused by having to find full-time work to support themselves over the summer period in the absence of any student support payments.

These findings of student financial hardship are not unique to estranged students. The recent NUS report on the cost of living for students and apprentices shows that financial hardship and its detrimental impact on mental health have increased among students from all backgrounds ([NUS, 2022](#)). However, the survey found that estranged students have been affected disproportionately by the cost of living crisis. Likewise, NUS Scotland's 'Broke' report ([2022](#)) found estranged student respondents were the most vulnerable of all the student groups they surveyed in Scotland, and were most adversely affected by financial hardship. Our findings support those of the 'Broke' report, illustrating how the estranged students participating in this research have struggled to sustain their studies on low incomes. Like the 'Broke' report, this research also found that students were not aware of the funds potentially available to them, or were reluctant to apply for them. More broadly, a lack of knowledge around the funding available to estranged students through SAAS and institutions meant students were missing out on funds they were entitled to.

Accommodation

Estranged students' current living situations were diverse. They lived in council housing, private rentals, with extended family members, with friends/family of friends, in halls and housing association properties. It was common for students to have experienced periods of homelessness or to have felt at risk of becoming homeless. Worries about this happening again in the future were pervasive. Some students had couch-surfed for long periods, relying on extended family, friends or family of friends with resultant feelings of insecurity and guilt. Others had lived in emergency and homeless accommodation; several of whom had accrued debt as a result of missed payments or rent arrears to the council.

Students felt their accommodation options were heavily limited by the high cost of student rents, particularly halls of residence and privately rented accommodation, where the maximum financial support available would often only cover rent, leaving nothing for the remaining essentials. Those in council accommodation said they would not be able to afford university or private rentals. This situation has worsened with recent inflation. The quality of accommodation was often an issue, with estranged students in this research, living in cheaper areas to afford rent where they felt unsafe or cramped, leading them to move frequently. Some had been forced to move accommodation during the summer break, which impacted negatively on their studies and mental health.

Estranged students faced challenges accessing guarantorship which meant they relied on family/friend's families to act as guarantors, had to make non-guarantor payments/large deposits, or were limited to cheaper options, such as staying with friends/relatives or council housing. While some universities offer rent guarantor schemes, awareness of these was mixed. Some students were completely unaware of them, whereas others had used them but highlighted their limitations.

Stakeholders, named contacts and students supported the development of a national system of guarantorship to overcome these issues.

Academic attainment, transitions and progression

Interviewees highlighted the significant impact of estrangement on academic attainment, transitions and progression. Issues leading to estrangement often began during school which, for some, impacted on their attainment and consequently their access to FE and HE. While at college or university, the financial and emotional impacts of estrangement led to interruptions to their studies through drop out, repeated trimesters/years, course changes and the necessity for additional time to complete assignments. This led to additional years' learning which increased the amount of student loan debt accrued.

While drop out was frequently considered, some students were able to overcome challenges and stay in education. This was possible due to high levels of resilience, determination, self-motivation and the support of college and university staff (both lecturers and support staff), friends and partners. Overall, however, estranged students often lacked the support networks to help them achieve academically, offer emotional support, and navigate systems. It was also emphasised by the students that they were concerned about their future after graduation, in relation to their finances, accommodation and emotional health.

Mental health

Amongst the students interviewed we found high levels of complex trauma resulting from their estrangement. Trauma negatively impacted on their mental health in a number of ways including anxiety, depression, eating disorders, self-harm and suicidal ideation and behaviour. These feelings were exacerbated by the stress resulting from financial and accommodation worries. Estrangement also led to feelings of loneliness, isolation and stigma and resulted in low confidence and self-esteem, as well as difficulties in forming relationships with other students and staff. While the negative mental health impact of being estranged predominated, students also experienced some positive aspects of estrangement including freedom through emancipation, escaping abusive relationships and being able to be themselves.

Estranged students' experiences of accessing support for their mental health and wellbeing were varied. Some students were not aware of what mental health support was available from their institution. Others experienced long waiting lists and resorted to accessing support outwith their institution with potential financial implications. Some of those who accessed support via their institution found it helpful, while others felt it did not sufficiently meet their needs.

In addition to receiving support from colleges, universities and other formal services, students reported being supported by classmates, friends, partners and their partner's family to cope with the many impacts of estrangement. These individuals provided estranged students with emotional support to both deal with the impact estrangement had on them, as well as at times when traditionally a parent may be expected to provide support. There were estranged students who talked

about their friends or partner being their chosen family. Without this support, estranged students said they would have felt lonely and unloved, been homeless or dropped out of education.

Institutional support for estranged students

There was evidence of estranged students receiving support through their institution to assist them with finances, accommodation, academic studies and mental health. Overall, those who received support found it helpful. However, estranged students experienced a number of barriers in accessing support.

- Students did not routinely disclose their estrangement to their institution at the start of their course. This was often due to a lack of awareness as to what estrangement is, but also a general reluctance to disclose until at times of crisis. Delays in self-declaration led to delays in estranged students receiving the support they were entitled to.
- Due to a lack of understanding of estrangement amongst students, and college and university teaching staff, students were not aware of the support available to them, and some staff were not aware of how to refer students for this support.
- Definitions of estrangement varied by institutions participating in this research, leading to inconsistent access to support across Scotland and some students missing out on support.
- Discretionary funding provided by colleges and universities varied considerably, leading some named contacts and stakeholders to report that it was a postcode lottery.
- Limited guarantor support was available through colleges and universities, and only applicable to institutional accommodation which students found expensive.
- Mental health support at colleges and universities was thought to be lacking and focused on educational attainment. There was a perceived lack of support for dealing with the issues estranged students face (e.g. trauma).

4.2. Improving support for estranged students

The students, stakeholders and named contacts who took part in this research proposed a number of ways in which estranged students could be more fully supported, to allow them to overcome the challenges and issues they face in FE and HE contexts in the future. These include:

Government, colleges and universities

- Declaration of estrangement: Support is needed for students to declare their estrangement (to both SAAS *and* their university/college) at the earliest opportunity to enable them to access the appropriate financial and mental health support. This will require clear and consistent definitions of estrangement to be adopted across government, FE and HE institutions.

- Raising awareness of estrangement: This is necessary in order that students understand they are estranged and entitled to the appropriate support, as well as to improve understanding among FE and HE staff. It will require more regular, proactive promotion of support available to estranged students through colleges, universities and SAAS to encourage earlier self-declaration, as often students found out about insitutional contacts and support from their peers months or years after their courses had started.
- There should be more proactive promotion of financial support available for estranged students, from SAAS and institutions. This, in tandem with increasing awareness of the term 'estrangement' would allow earlier self-identification and ensure estranged students are able to access the appropriate financial support.
- Improved mental health support: The consensus was that estranged students were not always aware or were not always able to access appropriate mental health support. As a result, there was a call for mental health support suitable for addressing the issues faced by students (for example, trauma, self-harm and/or suicidal ideation) to be more widely available and more actively promoted.

Government

- A nationwide guarantorship system: There was wide support for the provision of a national guarantorship system for estranged students which would cover any type of accommodation or provision of more affordable student accommodation.
- Improved financial support for estranged students: The consensus was that funding should be provided throughout the year, including the summer months, with funding based on bursaries rather than loans, to overcome the often financially precarious lives led by estranged students. It was stated that this financial support had to reflect the increases in the cost of living (particularly to cover accommodation, travel and food costs). It was argued by stakeholders, named contacts and students in this research that estranged students should be entitled to at least the same levels of funding as care-experienced students. Some college and university named contacts, and students, called for additional support to help them upon leaving university, particularly in relation to finances and accommodation.

Colleges and universities

- Increase awareness of the support available to estranged students in colleges and universities, including named contacts, and a dedicated webpage for estranged students on the institution's website. This should be easy to find and navigate and include details of the kind of support available . It could also include links to rent guarantor systems, bursaries, scholarships and other relevant information so it is all in one place.
- Clear and coherent guidance should also be given which outlines the range of ways in which discretionary funding can, and is being used, by colleges and universities.

- There was a view that the support systems offered to estranged students in colleges and in universities in Scotland should be consistent.

Schools

- Earlier declaration of estrangement could be encouraged through greater awareness and understanding of estrangement among both school staff and school pupils.

5. Conclusions

This research found that being estranged impacted on students' experiences of further education (FE) and higher education (HE) in Scotland in many ways, and these echoed those identified in the literature. Not having enough money to afford living essentials let alone the wider student experience, and concerns about accommodation were the most prominent. These were closely followed by experiences of trauma and its lasting effects on students' physical, mental health and wellbeing, and broader feelings of isolation and low self-esteem. Interviewees also highlighted how estrangement had adversely impacted on estranged students' experiences of school, college and university in terms of attainment, transitions and progression.

The challenges estranged students face whilst studying at college and university are numerous, and while a range of tailored support is available through both Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS) and colleges and universities, currently it is only addressing some of their needs. This research illustrates how estranged students can 'fall through the cracks' of policies designed to assist them. Issues around understanding of eligibility, a lack of knowledge of what it means to be estranged, and low awareness of support (from both SAAS and institutions) led to students not being able to access the appropriate, existing support on offer to them. Support varied across FE and HE institutions, and tended to rely on students themselves self-declaring as estranged, and then proactively seeking out and accessing the support. If students are unaware of the support they are entitled to, or are unable or reluctant to declare that they are estranged to their institution, there is a danger that this vulnerable group will not access the necessary assistance.

The issues raised in this report, particularly in relation to financial hardship, accommodation insecurity, and poor mental health increasingly affect students from all backgrounds ([Hall, 2022](#); [NUS, 2022](#)). However, these issues were amplified for estranged students, an already vulnerable group whose lives are likely to become even more challenging given the rising cost of living. Stakeholders, named contacts and students often compared the experiences of estranged students with those of care experienced students. Many felt the challenges faced by the two groups were comparable, though estranged students lack the support nets of additional funding and corporate parenting afforded to care experienced students in recent policy.

There are a number of ways in which governmental and institutional support can be improved. Increased funding whilst studying would improve the lives of estranged students and the financial difficulties they experience, though it may not fully resolve them, given the significant costs of accommodation and cost of living increases. There was a general consensus that a more proactive approach by colleges, universities and SAAS, to increase awareness of estrangement and the support available (financial, named contacts and mental health) for estranged students was needed. There was a call for estranged students to receive at least the same level of funding available to care-experienced students. Finally, the

implementation of a national guarantorship system was recommended to assist estranged students access accommodation more easily.

This study highlights some remaining gaps in our knowledge. Areas where additional research would be beneficial include the following:

- The literature highlights the key point of estrangement is between the ages of 16 and 19, and our study supports this. However, no students under the age of 18 came forward to be interviewed. Further research is required with this age group to explore how they could be better supported and encouraged to self-declare earlier in their estrangement.
- The experiences of estranged students at the point of graduation was outwith the parameters of this research. Further research exploring how estranged students cope with the exit from full-time education and the support they require post-graduation would develop further the evidence available.
- It should be noted that the colleges and universities who participated in the focus groups for named contacts were chosen as they were identified from the review of institutions as having elements of good practice in how they supported estranged students. Further research with institutions where there was less evidence of responding to the needs of estranged students may be beneficial in future, to explore and understand why this might be the case.

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Appendix 1: Institutional support for estranged students

1. Introduction

To contextualise institutional approaches to supporting estranged students, researchers reviewed publicly available information targeted at estranged students.

2. Methodology

The review was conducted in May/June 2022. Researchers reviewed publicly available policy documents and strategies to contextualise institutional approaches to estranged students. This involved searching webpages of FE/HE institutions in Scotland. In some cases, letters signed by institutions committing to the Stand Alone pledge were also analysed. Eighteen universities and 26 colleges were included in this strand of the review. Additional details about how Scottish colleges and universities support estranged students were also gleaned from the interviews with stakeholders and the focus group discussions with named contacts from 8 colleges and 6 universities.

3. Overview of support

The colleges and universities included in this review varied greatly in terms of the information and types of support they offered estranged students. These are summarised in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Summary of review of Scottish universities and colleges' information support for estranged students

	Universities	Colleges
Signed the Stand Alone Pledge	15	11
Dedicated website for estranged students	15	5
Named contact details provided on website	15	3
365 day accommodation	12	
Estranged students given priority for discretionary fund	7	
System of Guarantorship in place	5	
Bursary or institutional scholarship for estranged students	4	
Accommodation discount/funding for accommodation	2	
Total	18	26

The Stand Alone Pledge is a tool created by the estrangement charity Stand Alone that helps universities and colleges in the UK commit to and develop support for students who are estranged from their families. At the time of the review, the majority of Scottish universities (15 out of 18) had signed the Stand Alone Pledge, while a lower proportion of Scottish colleges had done so (11 out of 26).

On the whole, universities appeared better prepared for addressing the needs of estranged students. The majority of universities (n=15) had a dedicated area of

their website which provided information for estranged students, while just 5 of the colleges did so.

Of the 18 Scottish universities, 15 included the details of a named contact/s as a dedicated point of support for estranged students (and often care experienced students as well). This correlated with the institutions who had signed the Stand Alone pledge and who also had a webpage aimed at estranged students.

While 11 colleges had signed the Stand Alone pledge, just five included a dedicated area of their website aimed at estranged students. Of these, just three provided details of a named contact. While it was possible to find links to information about other colleges' Stand Alone pledges, the fact that they did not have a designated area for this on their website meant it would have been difficult for estranged students to find this information. Among other colleges which had signed the pledge, no information was found which described the tailored support they provide to estranged students. The relative invisibility of estranged students on college websites was in stark contrast to the considerable support reported to be provided by colleges in the focus groups conducted with named contacts (see Section 3.6 above).

Most universities, and some colleges provided definitions of estrangement on their webpages for estranged students. Several (5 universities and 1 college) used the definition adopted by the SFC, referring to estrangement as no longer having the support of family due to a breakdown in their relationship which has led to ceased contact. Others defined estrangement as having 'no contact' with parents figures or a permanent or an irrevocable breakdown in the relationship (this included 4 universities and 3 colleges). Six universities offered slightly broader definitions stating that estranged students are those who 'are studying without the support of a family network'. The University of Edinburgh's website detailing the support offered to estranged students notes that: 'You might be classed as an estranged student if you are: aged 25 or under at the start of your studies; without the financial or emotional support of your family due to a breakdown in the relationship'. In addition, several universities provide example of how estrangement can come about, and the potential causes of familial relationship breakdown.

Among the universities which had a website aimed at estranged students, there were considerable differences between the institutions in terms of the amount of information they provided to students. Some included detailed lists of the types of support they offer in relation to finance, accommodation, and academic and pastoral support, while others provided little information, instead encouraging estranged students to make contact with the team to see what support they might be able to access.

4. Financial support

The level of extra financial support available to estranged students varied widely by institution. Seven university's websites noted that estranged students are given priority for discretionary and hardship funding, while several included links for students to follow should they wish to apply for discretionary funding.

Four universities provide bursaries or scholarships specifically aimed at estranged students and other disadvantaged groups. Heriot-Watt University offer an Access bursary of £1,000 per year, while Stirling University offer a £500 bursary. Estranged students are eligible for the maximum support (£5,000 per year) offered by the University of Edinburgh as part of their Access scholarships. The University of Glasgow offer additional bursaries to estranged students but no details of these are provided on their website.

Other types of financial support included:

- University of Strathclyde: Estranged students a priority group to become a paid Student Ambassador for the duration of their studies
- Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU): guaranteed interview to become a paid Student Mentor for GCU Outreach
- University of Stirling: no graduation fee and assistance for gown hire
- University of Dundee: All estranged students will be offered a personal financial review to ensure they have access to the funding they are entitled to
- Queen Margaret University: Priority access to paid employment on campus
- Robert Gordon University: Financial support to attend the university's open days, applicants' days and selection visits
- Heriot-Watt University: travel costs support
- Royal Conservatoire of Scotland: Priority consideration for financial assistance from our HE Discretionary Fund if student funding package is not sufficient to support students while they study.

Although SAAS have removed reference to the expectation that estranged students will have had no contact for 12 months, this is referenced on the University of Edinburgh's webpage for estranged students. This notes that 'in order to apply for funding, you usually need to be either estranged from your family for 12 months or able to demonstrate that you are unlikely to reconcile.'

5. Accommodation support

Twelve out of 18 universities noted on their estranged students' webpages that they provide 365-days-a-year accommodation for estranged students. Other types of accommodation support offered by universities included:

- Robert Gordon University: estranged students (and other disadvantaged groups) are offered a discount on their first year's accommodation if they stay in specific halls of residence
- University of Stirling: offer an Accommodation Enhancement Fund of up to £1,200 to estranged students living in the cheapest University accommodation suitable to their needs
- St Andrews University: provide help with deposits for private rentals, and no deposit required for student accommodation

- The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh Napier University, Glasgow Caledonian University: encourage estranged students to apply for Unite scholarships which cover the cost of rent and bills for three years
- University of the Highlands and Islands: estranged students have priority access to university accommodation

From discussion with participants in the stakeholder interviews and college and university focus groups, we understand that five universities in Scotland offer a rent guarantor system for estranged students who wish to live in privately rented accommodation. However, this is only mentioned on the University of Aberdeen's webpage for estranged students (their rent guarantor scheme covers rents of up to £550 per month). The University of Edinburgh offers a rent guarantor scheme which covers rents of up to £700 per month, but estranged students are not listed as one of the priority groups and it is not mentioned on the estranged student webpage. Likewise, the University of Glasgow's rent guarantor scheme is also not mentioned on their page for estranged students, though it is mentioned on other parts of the website. This is limited to 50 students per year and covers rent of up to £650 per month. Students estranged from their family are one of the groups eligible for the scheme. Although the universities of Stirling and Edinburgh Napier provide rent guarantors to estranged students, little information was found on this on the websites. Four universities without a rent guarantor scheme noted on their websites that estranged students do not require a guarantor for university accommodation.

Colleges tended not to mention offering students spaces in their own accommodation. Only Perth College provided an option for students to stay over the summer, while Inverness College stated that they gave priority access to their accommodation to estranged students.

6. Pastoral and academic support

Universities and, to a lesser extent, colleges offered a range of additional support to estranged students with regards to pastoral and academic support. Some highlighted support for wellbeing and mental health, such as counselling. This included:

- University of St Andrews: estranged students offered initial meeting with Wellbeing Advisor to ensure they are accessing support they are eligible for
- Robert Gordon University: counselling service offered as long as is needed, and information provided on external low cost or free counselling support where additional support would be beneficial
- Queen Margaret University: promotes building up resilience and healthy living to support estranged students
- University of Stirling: single point of contact available to ensure individualised support package is implemented which includes mental wellbeing support
- Edinburgh Napier University: access to mental health, counselling, academic and signposting to other student services through Student Wellbeing and Inclusion Department

- South Lanarkshire College: Assistance with accessing additional support services, such as in-house counselling, pastoral support or mental health services
- Perth College UHI: Assistance with accessing additional support services - such as in-house counselling, pastoral support or mental health services

Several universities also made it clear that estranged students would receive the same support as that provided to care experienced students. For example, Robert Gordon University acts as a corporate parent for both groups.

Four universities mentioned other types of pastoral support such as peer mentoring and support groups. Queen Margaret University gives estranged students priority places on their peer-mentoring scheme, while Robert Gordon University have student-led support groups for estranged students, as does Edinburgh College. The Royal Conservatoire Scotland promote drop-in sessions for estranged students to meet with other estranged students and support staff. At the University of Edinburgh, estranged students in first year are set up with an undergraduate peer mentor, and are put in touch with networks of other estranged students.

In terms of access to university, 8 universities included estranged students as one of the groups who would receive a guaranteed or adjusted offer of a place. The University of Glasgow, for example, offers free participation in one of their pre-entry programmes, as well as a guaranteed adjusted offer of entry to those who are estranged. Queen Margaret University will give estranged students a guaranteed offer to the course they applied to, based on the minimum entry requirements.

7 Examples of good practice

Our interviews and focus groups with college and university named contacts highlighted the considerable levels of support being provided by Scottish FE and HE institutions. In some cases, this is reflected in institutions' webpages for estranged students while elsewhere it is not. This was particularly the case for the colleges where estranged students were often invisible on their websites, even those colleges which had signed the Stand Alone pledge. While most universities had a dedicated website, the information provided on these was often brief, instead inviting estranged students to contact the institution to discuss their needs.

Institutions can choose how they distribute discretionary funding, with many highlighting the tailored support they can provide on a case by case basis. However, the fact that support can vary by student makes it difficult for institutions to offer a comprehensive list of all the potential types of support they might provide. Most universities, and certainly, many colleges, provide little detail on their websites for the types of support they might be able to give their estranged students. This lack of transparency places the onus on students to approach their institution. It relies on them being confident enough to ask for, and to know what types of support they might need. If students were made more aware of what support they might be able to access, they may be more likely to declare their estranged students to the university or college, ensuring they were able to maximise their support.

Universities and colleges can improve their offer to estranged students by:

- Providing a dedicated webpage for estranged students
- Making such websites easy to find and navigate
- Communicating the potential support available to estranged students by providing as much detail as possible to students about the kinds of things they may be able to assist them with
- Include links to rent guarantor systems, bursaries, scholarships all in one place to ensure they are easy to find for students
- Providing details of a named contact
- Where a system of guarantorship exists, make this known to students, along with the caveats associated with it.



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