

## One University life, two experiences: Comparing university life for care experienced and estranged students to traditional students.

University is often described as a transformative experience – full of growth, challenge, and discovery. But not all students arrive on campus with the same background or support systems. Among the diverse student population, care experienced and estranged students – those are studying without the support of parents – often face unique challenges.

However, we still know so little about their experiences.

[HEPI](#) & [Advance HE](#) have been working with the [Unite Foundation](#) over the last three years to include questions about care experience or estrangement within the demographic characteristics of the Student Academic Experience Survey so we can start to better understand this group of students.

Using data from the Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES), we've explored how the attitudes and experiences of care experienced and estranged students compare with their non-care experienced peers across several key aspects of university life. The findings reveal both encouraging similarities and important differences that highlight where more support may be needed.

The 2025 survey includes 673 identified as a care leaver, 6.58% of all respondents sample size and 811 as estranged, 7.93% of total sample. All respondents were asked:

- Have you been in care?<sup>i</sup> If they answered yes they were coded into care leaver group
- Would you consider yourself estranged from your parents?<sup>ii</sup> If they answered yes, they were coded as an estranged student.

As the question on estrangement was asked to all students there is some overlap, 334 students, whose answers appear in both care leaver & estranged student answers.

In addition to support the data integrity in analysing the findings we took the responses just from those who were UK nationals, as there was a higher proportion of international students answering yes to the care leaver question which we didn't think reflected the current position of UK based care leaver and estranged students.

### Life satisfaction and wellbeing: more alike than different

When it comes to overall wellbeing, the data shows that care experienced students report similar levels of life satisfaction as their non care-experienced peers:

- Life satisfaction: 6.7 (care experienced) vs. 6.6 (non-care experienced)
- Sense of life being worthwhile: 6.5 vs. 6.7
- Happiness yesterday: 6.2 for both groups
- Anxiety yesterday: 4.6 for both groups

These scores, all measured on a scale from 0 to 10, suggest that care experienced students are just as likely to feel content and purposeful in their lives as others. This is a positive sign and levels have remained pretty stable over the last 3 years.

However, across all areas we see the experiences reported by estranged students worse than care experienced students, and in all cases are significantly worse than non-estranged students.

- Life satisfaction: 6.4 (estranged) vs. 6.6 (non-care experienced or estranged)
- Sense of life being worthwhile: 6.3 vs. 6.7
- Happiness yesterday: 5.9 vs 6.2
- Anxiety yesterday: 5.1 vs 4.6

## Loneliness: A quiet divide

One area where a significant difference emerges is loneliness: 45% of estranged students and 36% of care experienced students report feeling lonely "all or most of the time," compared to 27% of their non care experienced or estranged peers.

This gap is concerning. Loneliness can affect mental health, academic performance, and overall university experience. For care experienced students, who often lack the family support networks others rely on, building meaningful connections on campus can be more difficult. Pleasingly this has come down from 48% in 2023 for care experienced students who answered the 2023 survey, and 39% from 2024 responses although there has been a slight increase, 2% points, for estranged students from last years survey.

## Financial pressures and employment: working harder

As highlighted in the [full publication](#), another notable difference is in the number of hours spent in paid employment unrelated to their course. Both care experienced & estranged students work a statistically significantly higher number of hours per week, 11.3 & 11.1 respectively, compared to 8.8 hours for non-care experienced students.

We know that care experienced students face greater financial pressures, due to limited access to family financial support and a student finance system that isn't fit for purpose to fully support independent students. Balancing work and study can be challenging and may

impact academic outcomes or wellbeing. We see this in the number of care experienced students asking for extensions – with 44% of care experienced students asking for a deadline extension compared to 29% of their non care-experienced peers. The need to fit additional paid work is compromising students ability to complete their studies on time.

## Considering withdrawal: a red flag

Perhaps the most striking difference is in the proportion of students who have considered withdrawing from university. 43% of care experienced students and 44% of estranged students have considered leaving, compared to 28% of their peers.

This statistic is a clear signal that more needs to be done to support care experienced students in staying the course. Whether due to financial stress, loneliness, or other factors, the risk of dropout is significantly higher for this group.

## Bridging the Gap

The SAES data sets paint a nuanced picture. On many measures of wellbeing, care experienced students are doing just as well as their peers. But the differences—in loneliness, financial burden, and risk of withdrawal—highlight areas where universities can and should do more.

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<sup>i</sup> Q21ei. **Have you been in care?** Select yes if you've ever lived in public care or as a looked-after child, including:

- with foster carers under local authority care
- in a residential children's home
- being 'looked after at home' under a supervision order
- living with friends or relatives in kinship care

*Note: This does not refer to time spent in boarding schools, working in a care or healthcare setting, or if you are a carer yourself.*

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say

<sup>ii</sup> Q21eii. **Would you consider yourself estranged from your parents (i.e. you're not in contact with and supported by your parents)?** An estranged person is someone who no longer has the support of either of their parents, and often also other family members, due to a permanent breakdown in their relationship which has led to ceased contact.

*This might mean your biological, step or adoptive parents or wider family members who have been responsible for supporting you in the past.*

- Yes
- No
- Prefer not to say