

# SRHE

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**The project Exploring 'Estrangement' in Higher Education: Standing Alone or Settling In**

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## Summary

This project aimed to address a clear need for in-depth knowledge in relation to estranged students in higher education. Estranged students can be defined as a group of young adults who have unstable, minimal or no contact with either of their biological parents and/or their wider family networks (Blake, 2015). In the context of the UK, estrangement status was initially 'a feature of student support in England, Wales and Northern Ireland that allowed such students to be treated as independent of their parents for the means test' (Smith and Malcom, 2010, p.7) so that they could access grants, loans and other types of support. Support for estranged young adults wanting to enter and/or enrolled to Higher Education (HE) in Scotland has only recently been addressed at HEI level with the support of organisations such as Stand Alone and ButtleUK.

Based on qualitative interviews (n=23), this study enabled us to understand how estranged students navigate Higher Education structures and the institutional and interpersonal resources available. It offers an examination of 'estranged students' HE expectations, how these are met and managed and what educational and employment aspirations are fostered and supported. The project aimed to identify key issues regarding estranged students' identity, attitudes to and expectations of HE, addressing the following research questions:

- How effective are policies in addressing the integration of estranged students in Scottish HE?
- How are policies making a difference in estranged students' lives?
- How do policies intersect or divert from estranged students experiences and expectations?
- What issues arise from being an estranged student in HE and how are these dealt with via the formal (and informal) mechanisms made available to students?
- What role does HE have in integrating estranged students in a contemporary society?

This preliminary research resonates with wider studies showing that HE students become estranged from their families for a number of reasons, including emotional and physical abuse, clash of values and mismatched expectations around family roles. In addition, estrangement can also relate to 'divorce, honour-based violence, forced marriage, and family rejection of LGBTQI+ students' (Blake, 2015). Although we are starting to learn more about the reasons of estrangement, this study contributes to understanding the experiences and trajectories of this group of young adults into and within HE in Scotland.

The research comes in the midst of recent and significant press attention, and campaigning visibility, on the Stand Alone programme (e.g.: <https://www.positive.news/2018/society/34170/how-can-we-help-students-who-are-estranged-from-their-families>) and is actively incorporating media analysis into the research. Theoretically, the study is informed by research on intersectional inequalities in the HE landscape (Taylor, 2012, 2014) widening participation programmes (Taylor and Scurry, 2011) and wider issues of belonging, identity and aspiration.

The practice of initiating contacts, securing fieldwork and conducting this research has confirmed that estranged students are a 'hard to reach' cohort of higher education students (as predicted at the writing stage of the research project proposal). This relates to the usual hurdles researchers often face when trying to establish contact with under-represented groups, but also to the fact that more often than not students who fall under such categorization have not necessarily been identified by higher education widening participation teams whose remit is to provide support to this cohort of students. Additionally, some student do not necessarily self-identify as 'estranged', and do not seek out institutional support given risk of being stigmatized. Nonetheless, we were able to recruit a substantial number of research participants, establishing rapport with key stakeholders and building on widening participation networks. We interviewed 23 students who meet the criteria set for this research project.

Preliminary findings of the data suggest that little has been done to support estranged students in navigating Higher Education Institutions' structures beyond entry point, and that there is substantial work still to do. The lack of financial and emotional support seems to be central. Participants have provided insights into the resilience of participants in pursuing their Higher Education objectives, often epitomized by a personal sense of acquired independence.

### **Estrangement in higher education**

Estrangement feels very taboo... it's almost like having to out myself a lot of the time to people... people are more familiar with the idea that your parents are divorced or have died or whatever (interviewee: Jennifer, 31)

To understand estrangement it is necessary to understand the role and importance placed upon 'family'. Family is usually defined as a group of people who have legal or biological connections to each other, connections that transcend the amount of contact established between family members and even death (Agillas 2016). Family connections, particularly those between parents and children are typically characterized by the idea of 'unconditional love' (Scharp and McLaren 2017). Such interpretation of family connections however conveys a binary approach to the meaning of family identity in which families who have ongoing, open and functional relationships are seen as the norm and where family bonds and relationships that have broken down are construed as 'unnatural' and 'in need of professional intervention' (Allen and Moore 2017, 287). Family estrangement, in this sense, is more often than not regarded as a form of deviance and interference in relation to both unquestioned assumptions and the cultural imagination that 'a family is forever' (Sharp 2017, 2). This is problematic in that such approach casts estrangement as an anomaly that requires fixing. It also raises questions regarding one's identity and the sense of powerlessness that is implicit to the idea that family links are everlasting. Nonetheless, family estrangement is becoming a more prevalent reality in modern society (Conti 2015).

Causes for estrangement span a wide range of issues, including practices of (physical and/or psychological) violence and abuse in the home, parental neglect (Carr et al. 2015) as well as breakdown in communication because of sexual identities, release from authoritarian boundaries, different value systems, expectations regarding family roles and relationships, or even physical distance (Bland 2018, 71). Reasons for estrangement are indeed varied and can happen on a voluntary or involuntary basis. Ultimately, estrangement creates emotional and physical distance between family members and has wide implications on the lives of those who move away from the classic support structures that are associated with family, especially regarding social, emotional and economic support. There is an intrinsic connection between family and the types of capitals an individual possesses and which are of key relevance in the forming years of an individual.

In the current context of western societies, such types of capital are essential for young people transitioning into adulthood. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation has extended the age range of what they understand youth to be to up to 24 years of age. The UN's rationale for this derives from the understanding that 'youth is best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood's independence' (UNESCO 2014). Implied in such statement is the assumption that young people are reliant on their immediate family circle. Such understanding also presupposes that young people's dependence on family extends to transition and completion of higher education, as higher education students are traditionally expected to complete their first university degree between the ages of 21 and 24. Estranged students, however, bring these two assumptions into question. Firstly, estranged students are usually not in close or constant contact with their immediate family due to the very nature of estrangement. Secondly, they do not necessarily meet expectations or representations of 'traditional students' given that they may not hold, accumulate or transform capitals in the same ways, being more likely to enter higher education at a later stage. Family membership arguably provides an individual with a protected, privileged and advantageous place in society, in general, and in education, in particular.

In contrast, the scarcity, lack of and sometimes tenuous and precarious links with family connections unveils a set of critical challenges. Family membership is still often regarded as the bedrock of social capital. For 'traditional' students, family support and 'social capital' can become an implicit advantage that is initially closely associated with family ties, and many have evidenced the operation of this in middle-class students' experiences.

Family estrangement can be – and often is – also marked by a lack or loss of economic capital as disconnection from the family's close circle usually means leaving behind the physical resources made available to and by the family. In the context of students entering and studying in academia, the lack of social and economic capitals can have profound implications on their experiences – for example, in affording accommodation and basic goods (Bland, 2018). Such capitals are influential in enabling students to progress through and out of higher education as testified by extant literature on widening participation (see, for example, Bathmaker et al. 2013; Heath et al. 2010; Watson 2013; Whitty et al. 2015).

Even though there is a significant body of work on the experiences of non-traditional students, such as care-leavers (e.g. Cotton et al. 2014; Harrison 2007; Jackson et al. 2005), estranged students have received far less attention in terms of research and policy making (Bland 2018). The literature on estrangement in higher education has been mostly linked to widening participation research that emphasises equal entry level access. This is a naïve perspective to adopt in that access is not the only hurdle estranged students need to overcome. Positioning students as 'non-traditional' can encourage a deficit perspective (Field and Morgan-Klien 2010) and labelling students as 'disadvantaged' may strengthen stereotypes (Smit 2012) rather than contest them. This 'othering' of

students from non-traditional backgrounds may well encourage a sense of difference among students themselves. This is a hidden practice that affects estranged students too (Stand Alone and Blake 2015). At stake here is how one's sense of self is constructed through this process of 'othering' that is enacted through policy and related practices.

While it is clear that steps have been made in helping higher education institutions identify and support estranged students, there is also a growing awareness that estranged students do not fit pre-existing widening participation policies (e.g. Bland 2018; UCAS 2017). This is so because definitions of estrangement within the context of higher education are rather restrictive and inflexible thus not showing an understanding or appreciation for the complexity of estrangement practices. For example, the Office for students, previously known as the Office for Fair Access or OFFA, limits the status of estrangement in higher education to students between 18 and 24 years old and stipulates that estrangement means no communicative relationship with either living biological parent (ibid 2018), a definition also shared by the Student Loans Company (2016). This is a very limiting conception of estrangement, because it regards students in a very traditional sense through age benchmarks, thus conflicting with the purpose and mission of widening participation policies. It is important to note that it is unlikely that estrangement completely ceases or becomes irrelevant when a student reaches the age of 25. Valentine et al. (2003) recognise that even when young people leave the family home it 'continues to be the site through which many of their individual biographies and expectations are routed' (481) beyond the tidy age of 25. This signals the complexity in defining 'youth' and the significance of this (expanding) point in the life-course of an individual, especially when the individual in question lacks the social and economic support that they are assumed to receive.

Moreover, such definitions disregard the fact that there are different degrees of estrangement. Estrangement does not have to be permanent nor a total lack of contact with family members; it can be cyclical/on-again/off-again (Scharp and Hall 2017). Criteria to identifying estrangement present challenges in that it can be very difficult to 'prove' the status of estrangement under such restrictive conditions. This also raises questions of how different entities understand the phenomenon of estrangement to impact on university students' experiences, and how the criteria they impose can work as mechanisms of stigmatization rather than support. Such definitions of estrangement shape the identity of those who are formally associated with it and who often become victims of scrutinisation and unfair surveillance strategies through justifications of anti-fraud detection tactics. Often approaches do not take into account the specificities, vulnerabilities or characteristics of estranged students (Bland 2018).

Such issue have led us to explore how the experiences of estranged students are considered by higher education institutions and the different supporting bodies and by the students themselves: how do estranged students develop their social identity within academia? As pointed out by Blake (2017), research into estrangement can help 'untangle family myths from society' (533). In our perspective, it can also help develop new understandings regarding how individuals that experience estrangement position themselves within the spheres of practice in which they move.

## Conclusions

Ideologies about family still tend to emphasise an unbreakable bond making any other type or lack of family relationship be regarded as atypical. This conception is currently no different in the context of Scottish Universities, where similar to the rest of the UK, students who do not have the backing of their family are given the status of 'estranged' as a form of identifying them as a vulnerable group.

Although well intentioned, these supporting structures only cater partially for the needs of estranged students who are often considered from the perspective and experience of traditional students, with an additional concern of financial support. More concretely, estrangement policies do very little when it comes to consider the sense and development of identity formation of these individuals. Even though financial support is indeed a key issue for estranged students, their experiences are not only marked by the lack of physical resources. In this regard, students with the status of estrangement bring to the fore the need to challenge normative assumptions of what being a university student in a contemporary society means. Their experience of higher education also comes to testify that students' struggles (estranged or not) need to be accounted for intersectionally rather than through a tick box exercise of the separate widening participation agendas to which higher education institutions sign up. Moreover, little is known about estranged students' in terms of race, class, gender and sexuality, a knowledge gap that requires research attention.

As Universities claim readiness to welcome a diverse student body on their campus, there is a pressing need to acknowledge and rethink the complexity of students' academic lives through a more encompassing approach that does not (indirectly) discriminate students because they do not fit within a regular or expected pattern of what it means to be a university student. Rather widening participation agendas should be looking to recognise the changing nature of academic life through a more inclusive, holistic approach: one that includes an informed understanding of how students position themselves in academia and how their identity and academic status is enabled and developed with the support of the university. Inclusion of estranged students in academia does not stop at entry point, as to measure entry as success would mean to ignore the challenges students bring and carry with them throughout their studies, and indeed beyond. This is particular true for estranged students whose lack of family support is taken into consideration from a financial perspective but not from a sociological one that would account for their sense of identity.

Interviewees' experiences often lead to economic difficulties in that access to basic goods become a constant struggle; a struggle that is further compounded by limited meaningful social ties that could provide support. Experiences of estrangement can also lead to homelessness and a strong sense of exclusion within the higher education context. Thus, estranged students' experiences are not only impacted by the scarcity of economic or social capital, but rather by their intersection, which then impacts on symbolic positions in the field of higher education. The near constant sense of precarity can be compared with other 'widening participation' students, attending to the differences and similarities between and within 'student groups'; thus far 'estranged students' have also been conceptualised fairly homogeneously, and more research is needed to further explore this as well as to strategically argue for specific and practical resources for this group (as per the Stand Alone Pledge) across time and place. It is also important to consider student's own definitions, as well as resistances and personal strength evident in all discussions of the challenges faced by estranged students. Often these students face isolation, uncertainty, financial instability and fear of homelessness, and yet have still secured a place at university using whatever limited resources, personal and practical, to navigate barriers to their academic success.

## **Dissemination**

	Output/outcome type (publication, conference paper, etc.)	Description
1	Conference paper, to be published thereafter in <i>British Journal of Sociology of Education</i> (submitted)	<p>BERA, 11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2018</p> <p>Accessing Higher Education: The experiences of 'estranged students' beyond entry point</p> <p>With this paper, we present the role of the Stand Alone Pledge and how it sits/departs from existing approaches to Widening Participation (WP). We consider national policies and practices such as those of the Office For Fair Access (OFFA) and the Student Award Agency for Scotland (SAAS) as well as the responses of universities to 'estranged students' and the requirements of the Stand Alone pledge. This paper also marks the first research of estrangement in Scottish HE and the first study in the UK using an in-depth, qualitative approach of the topic. We hope to contribute unique insights into the experiences of 'estranged students' from an intersectional lens of class, gender and ethnicity (Taylor and Scurry, 2011).The study will have practical implications in terms of policy development, HE support practices and the health and well-being of 'estranged students' in Scotland and the UK.</p>
2	Conference Paper and Conference Organization	<p>University of Strathclyde, 20<sup>th</sup> Sept. 2018</p> <p>'Accessing Higher Education: The Experiences of 'Estranged Students' speakers included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- <b>Dr Lucy Blake:</b> Lucy is a lecturer in Children, Young people and Families in the Faculty of Health and Social Care at Edge Hill University. Her research explores the breakdown of relationships between family members in adulthood.</li> <li>- <b>Becca Bland:</b> CEO of Stand Alone, a charity which supports adults experiencing estrangement. The Stand Alone pledge has now been taken on by over 45 Higher Education institutions across the UK.</li> </ul> <p>Speakers from the University of Strathclyde Widening Participation team; as well as a student panel of students studying while estranged.</p>
3	Conference paper, to be published thereafter in	<p>AERA – American Educational Research Conference, 5th-9th April 2019</p> <p>Estranged Students' Experiences of Higher Education</p>

	British Educational Research Journal (submitted)	This paper aims to address a clear need for in-depth knowledge in relation to estranged students in higher education. Despite the latest widening participation policies developments in the UK, 'estranged students' continue to face numerous and specific hardships not only in accessing HE, but also in completing their studies, hardships that remain unaddressed and which encompass not only financial pressure, but also experiences of homelessness, discrimination and mental health problems amongst other issues, during their time at University (Bland, 2015).
4	Conference paper, to be submitted for publication in <i>Educational Review</i>	'Student Engagement for All' SPARQS conference, March 2019  The theme for the conference is 'Student Engagement for All'. It will provide an opportunity to focus on and pull together activity from across the sector on student engagement in relation to widening access, equality and diversity, transitions, representation of non-traditional students, staff development...and more! The conference will provide an opportunity to showcase this work, share expertise and learn from good practice with colleagues from Scotland, the rest of the UK and beyond.
5	British Sociological Association (Regional Forum) (Conference)	University of Strathclyde, April 2019.  'A Sense of 'Strangeness' in Higher Education Widening Participation: The Place of Stand Alone and Student Estrangement'  The goal is to raise awareness and encourage informed action regarding the experiences of widening participation students in HE through the application of social theory to practice and action. Specifically the place of 'estranged' students, as a relatively 'new' category of WP, will be highlighted.  Lead by researchers in Sociology and Education, it will advance the role of social science research in realizing and impacting on HEIs' and students' lived experiences, also informing key stakeholders and providers. The event will feature online via relevant professional and organisational blogs and researchers' online presences, with a dedicated #hashtag to extend the conversation.
6	The research findings will also be distributed through relevant mailing lists and the researchers' web presences, such as Twitter and the <a href="#">Social Theory Applied</a> blog.	Research findings will be disseminated through the Social Theory Applied blog: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blogpost 1 – Provided an overview of the research will be published to coincide with the presentation of the BERA Conference (11<sup>th</sup> September 2018)</li> </ul>



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Blogpost 2 –Captured the key messages conveyed at the event hosted at Strathclyde (to be published 24<sup>th</sup> September 2018)</li> <li>• Blogpost 3 – Will summarise key research findings - to be published once 1<sup>st</sup> research paper is accepted for publication (as not to conflict with publisher’s guidelines)</li> </ul>
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## Impact and Engagement

	<b>Audience</b>	<b>Description of the activity undertaken or planned and associated impact</b>
<b>1</b>	General Public via ESRC Festival of Social Science bid (unsuccessful) and reworked for an Engage Event, University of Strathclyde (May 2019)	<p>A Sense of ‘Strangeness’ in Higher Education Widening Participation: The Place of Stand Alone and Student Estrangement (May 2019)</p> <p>The event will be varied in format and content, including Pecha Kucha and workshop sessions, and visual material (postcards), and will encompass different presenters (researchers, WP practitioners and students): audiences will thus be offered a diverse range of conversation points.</p>
<b>2</b>	General Public, Policy and Academic Audiences (Strathclyde University) with Stand Alone	<p>(Glasgow, September 16th-17th 2019)</p> <p>The meeting will feature a range of talks, discussions, and networking opportunities with experts, researchers and leaders in the field of family estrangement. This conference is being organised by Becca Bland, CEO of Stand Alone, Professor Yvette Taylor School of Education, University of Strathclyde and Lucy Blake, Senior Lecturer in Children Young People and Families at Edge Hill University.</p>

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