Care Leavers/Experienced and Estranged Students in HE (CLEESinHE) – Unlocking data. 2025 – 2028 Plan.

Purpose

From 2023 there has been a concerted effort by CLEESinHE members to address the historically low level of publicly available data at sector level on care experienced and estranged students. This lack of available data means that institutions are unable to understand the engagement and experiences of care experienced and estranged students within HE institutions; therefore, severely limiting their ability to understand fully the challenges this group faces in getting to, and staying in, higher education. Absence of national data also undermines sector wide initiatives. This paper sets out the key areas that we have identified, progress that's been made and areas to progress further.

Ambitions

1. **New data** – Experience of care experience & estranged students, as a comparison to other students or experiencing differing forms of intervention, is not possible at a national and institutional level. This data doesn't currently exist because flags for care experience or estranged were/are not captured within data design/infrastructure. We must lobby for such flags to be detailed – ideally alongside protected characteristics – so that data on care experienced and estranged students is routinely available in wider contexts.

2. **Surfacing existing data** – On other data sources (for example HESA/JISC), flags of some form do exist but reports capturing this population are not part of a release or publishing profile. Cost barriers inhibit learning and trend analysis. We must apply leverage to ensure routine, free, annual release of report suites for care experienced and estranged students.

Current state of play – May 2025

1. **New data** – Key areas to create change:
    1.1. **NSS** – since 2023 OfS agreed to publish care leaver/experienced data [following lobbying](#) from CLEESinHE members Sector level data on care experience has now been published for the last 2 years, and we've been told that providers should be able to access their own data. Still to do:
        1.1.1. Continue to draw out data insight when NSS is published – ideally getting sight of data in advance to share reflections on launch day .
        1.1.2. Ensure individual institutions know that they can access data locally and are utilising it within their APP work.
        1.1.3. Lobbying to include estranged student data (unlikely to happen until HESA field for estrangement below)

    1.2. **Student Academic Experience Survey** – in 2023 HEPI and Advance HE [published](#) the data set with care experience as a question within the demographics section allowing us to analyse the data (with a

caveat that additional work needed doing to take out international students who answered the question invertedly) This was updated in 2024 and pleasingly data was published again. Still to do:

    1.2.1.   Continue to share the findings and insight with universities to raise awareness of data

1.3. **Higher Education Access Tracker – HEAT.** Initially developments in this arena were focussed on care experienced and estranged flags to be captured within the database's characteristics set. This has been 'held' due to complexities in updating the privacy policy in context of the HESA linkage. Recently HEAT has however been identified as a partner to TASO in delivering the Higher Education Evaluation Library (HEEL). This library, in consultation as of May 2025 with anticipated launch of Spring 2026, will deliver on the OfS requirement for HEI to publish APP evaluations, and provide a 'pool' from which TASO can produce subject-specific digests and oversee the state of sector evaluation. Still to do:

    1.3.1.   Members to submit their evaluations relating to interventions for care experienced and estranged students and encourage submission by others to build and share knowledge.

    1.3.2.   Lobby TASO and OfS for an early 'digest' from HEEL to focus on this population of students to address profile and learning

    1.3.3.   Consider in the future how within HEEL there is an ability to develop and collect a core set of questions to understand how WP activity impacts physiological and safety needs (as per Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs) to build on work that TASO had commissioned on [validated questionnaire for widening participation](#).

1.4. **HESA flag for estranged students** – For England there is currently no flag for estrangement, however this is already available in Scotland and Wales with an outstanding action within CLEESinHE to see this implemented in England. Still to do:

    1.4.1.   Continue to lobby OfS & DfE about need to request HESA estranged student flag within dataset

2. **Surfacing existing data** – Key areas to create change:

2.1. **Standardised release of HESA data** – moving to a point where HESA freely share the annual statistics around care leaver & experienced students. DfE have facilitated conversations with HESA to publish within its open data and business intelligence services. HESA is currently planning a comprehensive look back at historical data on care leavers through the HESA flag for 2025 and then annually regular releases of the data. Still to do:

    2.1.1.   Continue to support HESA in the release for 2025

    2.1.2.   Lobby for ongoing release of data into 2026 and beyond

2.2. **Care leaver pipeline –** DfE to publish an annually updated, national overview of the care experienced student pipeline, utilising data already in the public domain within the [Local Authority Interactive Toolkit](#) (LAIT) that holds looked after children's key stage as well as the % to age 21 that are in FE or HE. . This will enable:

    2.2.1.   Accurate calculation for the population that could/should be entering HE annually if were on a par with non-care leavers

    2.2.2.   Targeted outreach by HEI and third sector organisations working to enhance that pipeline

2.2.3.   Initial prompts of LA practice that may be influencing progression rates

2.3. **Local Authority HE outcomes data** – Currently there are no published datasets that detail progression and completion outcomes for care leavers in HE split by Local Authorities. Knowing this data will help us better understand how interventions from LA's support retention e.g. in/out of term time rent. To do:

    2.3.1.   DfE to utilise an existing, large, birth-year dataset from the 2025 Rees Centre study, add the relevant LA data, and signpost to positive LA outliers for detailed evaluation

    2.3.2.   Encourage DfE and NAVSH to collaborate on expanding the LAIT to capture to age 25 in HE and completion rates.