

# No Place Like Home?

The accommodation experience  
of care-experienced and  
estranged students

Unite

Foundation



INDEX





# Foreword.

At the Unite Foundation, we are really pleased to welcome *No Place Like Home?* - a valuable step in understanding the accommodation experiences of care-experienced and estranged students. Drawing on the voices of those with lived experience of the care system and family estrangement, this report offers one of the clearest pictures yet of what a home truly means for young people in higher education studying without the safety net of family support.

What stands out most from this research is not simply that accommodation matters, but how profoundly it shapes stability, well-being, and the ability to stay and succeed at university. Care-experienced and estranged students consistently face higher financial strain, lower well-being, and more barriers throughout the accommodation journey - from choosing where to live, to moving in, to navigating daily life. Worryingly, both groups are significantly more likely to say their accommodation is negatively affecting their mental health, and around one in three are seriously considering withdrawing from university.

Yet the report also highlights something important: **when accommodation is right, when it is safe, stable, welcoming and affordable, students can thrive.** Their overall satisfaction remains comparatively high, and many express a desire to stay in their current accommodation for another year. We know that for care-experienced and estranged students, stability isn't a 'nice to have', it is the foundation that allows them to focus on what they came to university for.

These insights align powerfully with the priorities set out in the [Unite Foundation Blueprint](#), which calls on the sector to place housing security at the heart of support for care-experienced and estranged students. It also echoes the evidence from our accommodation scholarships, which are currently the only intervention evidenced at the Office for Students Tier 2 level to impact on the progression, completion and attainment of care experienced students. Accommodation is a core issue for students' academic outcomes and their welfare.

This report also makes clear that accommodation providers and universities should work together to improve the first steps in the journey. Move-in experiences are consistently poorer for care-experienced and estranged students. Ensuring clear pre-arrival communication, named contacts, trauma-informed welcome practices and supportive community-building can transform what is too often an isolating or overwhelming moment.

What *No Place Like Home?* ultimately shows us that the sector already has many of the tools required to close these gaps. The challenge now is to apply them with focus, consistency and accountability. By embedding the recommendations of this report and the ambitions of the Blueprint, universities and accommodation providers, alongside local authorities, can play a decisive role in improving outcomes for care-experienced and estranged students.

Creating a stable home at university is not separate from supporting academic success; it is a tool to achieve it. We hope this report prompts renewed commitment to making "home" possible for every care-experienced and estranged student who needs it.

**Fiona Ellison**

Co-Director, The Unite Foundation

# Introduction.

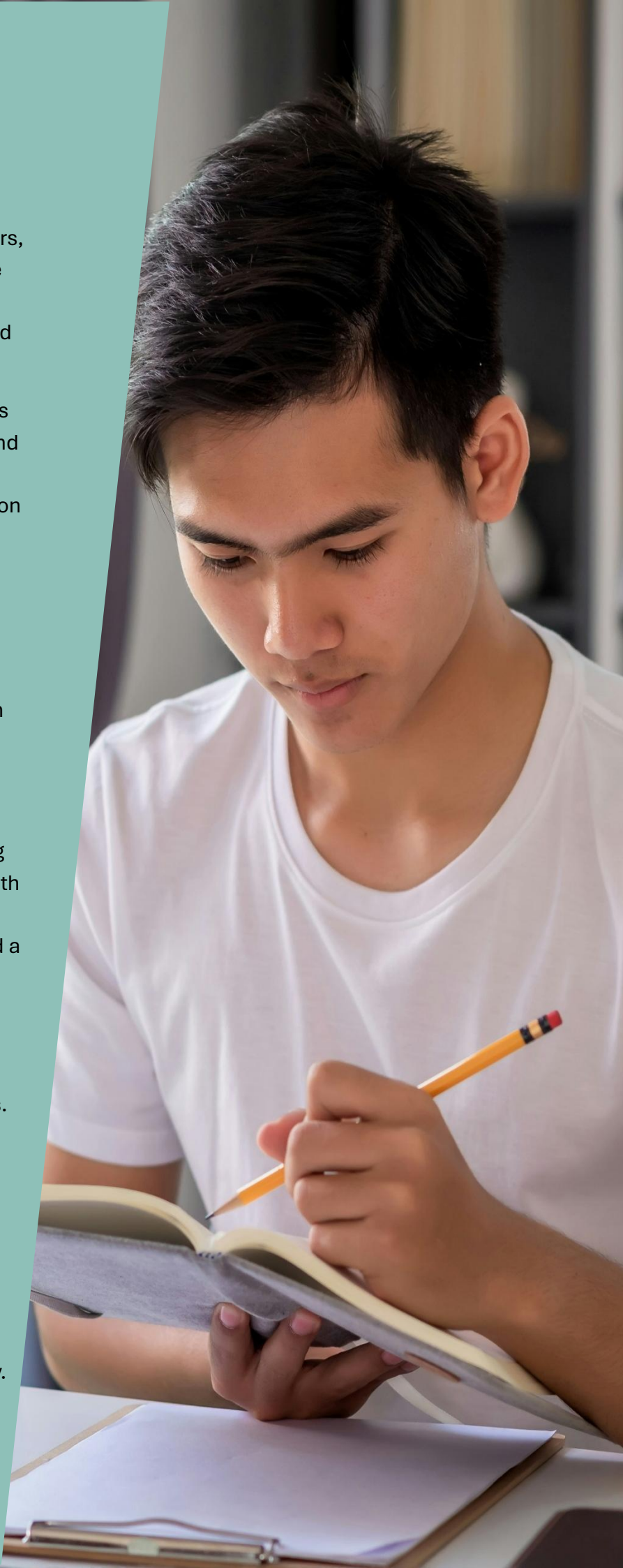
**Global Student Living (GSL)** is the global network for student accommodation investors, developers, operators and suppliers, and the definitive channel for professional news, information and insight into student living and lifestyle around the world.

The Global Student Living Index (GSL Index) is our world-leading student insight platform and performance improvement tool for both university and private student accommodation providers.

Drawing on data from over 44,000 survey responses from students living in university and private provider Purpose Built Student Accommodation (PBSA) across the UK and Ireland in Autumn 2025, this joint report from GSL and The Unite Foundation explores the accommodation experience of both care-experienced and estranged students.

The **Unite Foundation** is a charity supporting estranged and care-experienced students with a rent-free home at university through a nationwide accommodation scholarship and a national community of students. We have a vision of a future in which care-experienced and estranged students in the UK attend university, progress in their studies and graduate at the same rates as other students. We want to ensure that all care-experienced and estranged students have a home at university so that they can succeed.

The Unite Foundation was set up in 2012 by Unite Students, who remain our principal corporate donor, and whose funding has helped almost 900 care-experienced and estranged students with a home at university.

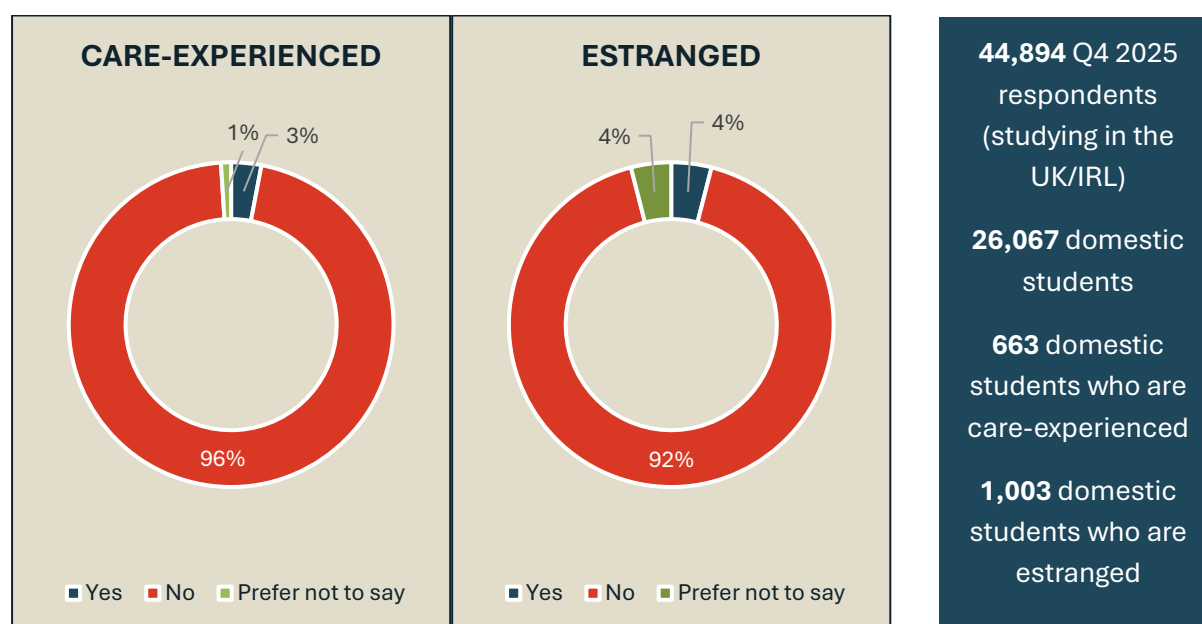


# Methodology and Respondents.

## TERMINOLOGY

**Care-experienced:** Students who have 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.

**Estranged:** 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 biological, step or adoptive parents or wider family members who have been responsible for supporting them in the past.

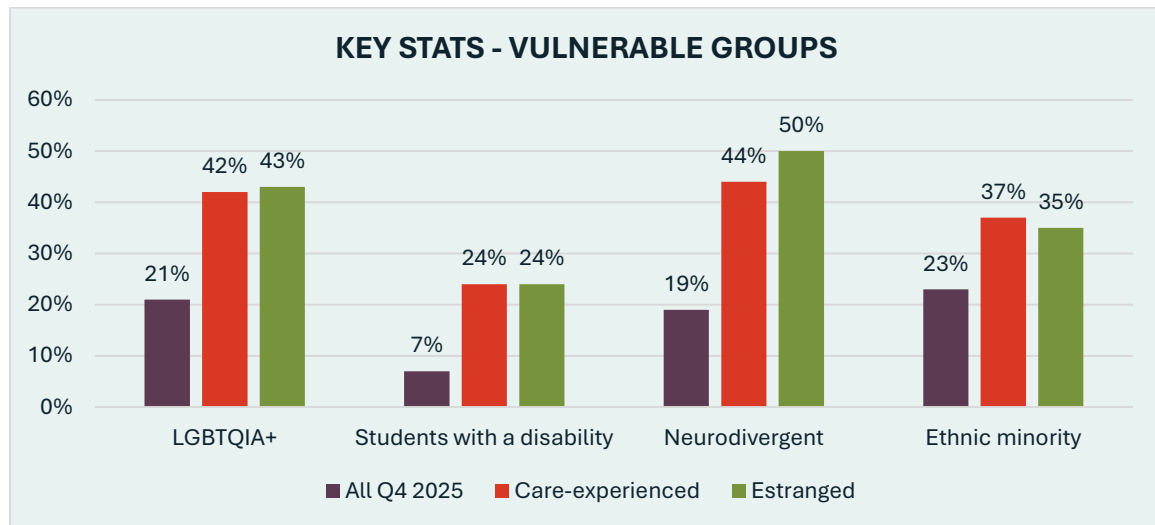


## Demographic Profile.

Estranged and care-experienced students are significantly more likely to overlap with other vulnerable groups.

They are no more likely to be male or female but are more likely to self-define their gender (7% compared with 2%), identify as LGBTQIA+, and consider themselves part of an ethnic minority. A significant proportion report having a disability, with one in four

indicating this. Rates of neurodivergence are also particularly high, affecting 50% of estranged students and 44% of care-experienced students.



## Attitudes.

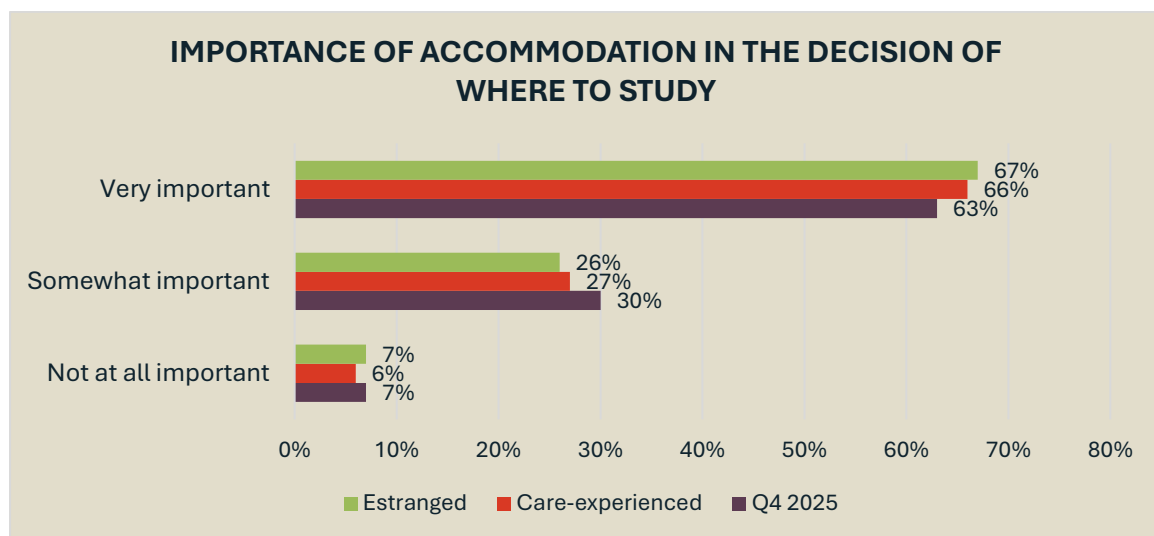
Estranged and care-experienced students are significantly more likely than other domestic students to report a range of attitudes and behaviours, including having friends from diverse backgrounds, spending money impulsively, and being more inclined to take risks. They also tend to show a preference for quieter social environments or spending time alone, and report challenges with commitments and motivation.

	Q4 2025 DOMESTIC STUDENTS	CARE-EXPERIENCED	ESTRANGED
My friends come from a diverse range of backgrounds and cultures	70%	77%	79%
I prefer a quiet night in, to a big night out	49%	59%	58%
I enjoy socialising rather than being by myself	61%	51%	55%
I often struggle to find the motivation to get things done	65%	70%	70%
I consider myself to be a risk-taker	44%	49%	53%
I tend to spend money without thinking	43%	52%	53%
I struggle to fit my studies around other commitments	41%	45%	50%
Religion is a major part of my life	25%	26%	31%
I am always concerned about what others think	59%	64%	61%
It's important to know about a company's values and what they stand for before I buy from them	56%	59%	62%

Attitudinally, there are also some differences between care-experienced and estranged students. Care-experienced students express greater concern about others' opinions, while estranged students are more likely to say religion plays a major part in their lives - one of the major factors that can trigger estrangement. Additionally, estranged students place greater importance on organisational values when considering the companies they engage with and are more likely to struggle to fit their studies around other commitments.

## Choice and application.

Estranged students are significantly more likely to say accommodation was 'very important' in their decision of where to study. Care-experienced students are also more likely to say this, but the difference is not statistically significant.



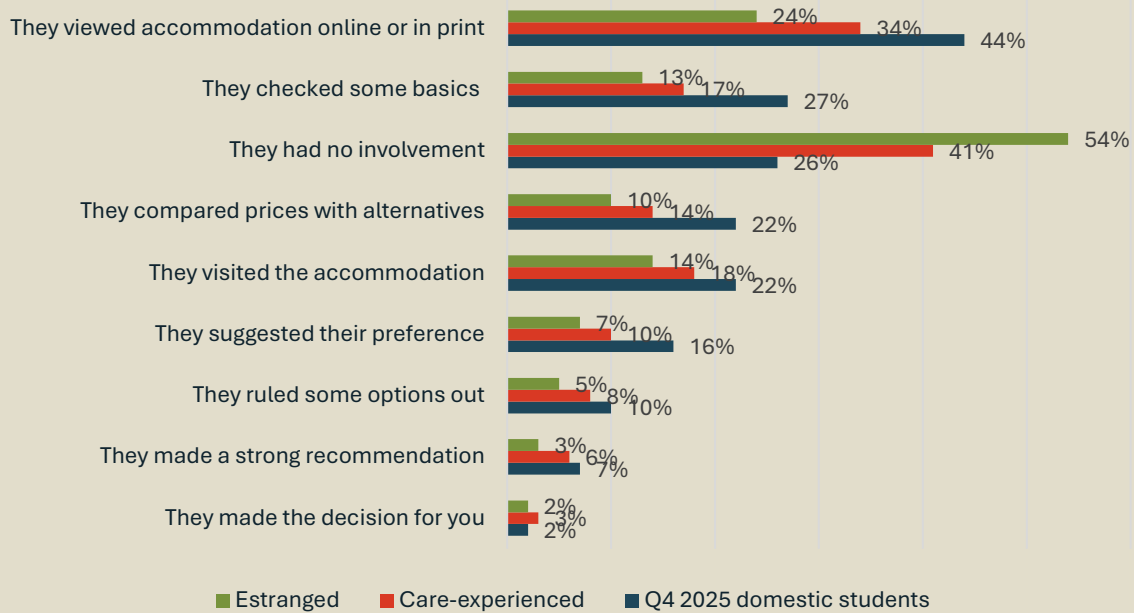
Generally, care-experienced and estranged students use the same types of resources to find accommodation. University websites are the most popular source, followed by general web searching. However, estranged students are considerably less likely to attend open day visits than the average domestic student (24% compared with 36%).

### FUNDING AND FAMILY INVOLVEMENT

Care-experienced and estranged students report a notably different experience regarding the role of family in decisions about where to live. Estranged students are more than twice as likely to have had no family involvement in this decision (54% compared with 26%), and care-experienced students are also significantly more likely than the average domestic student to report no family input.

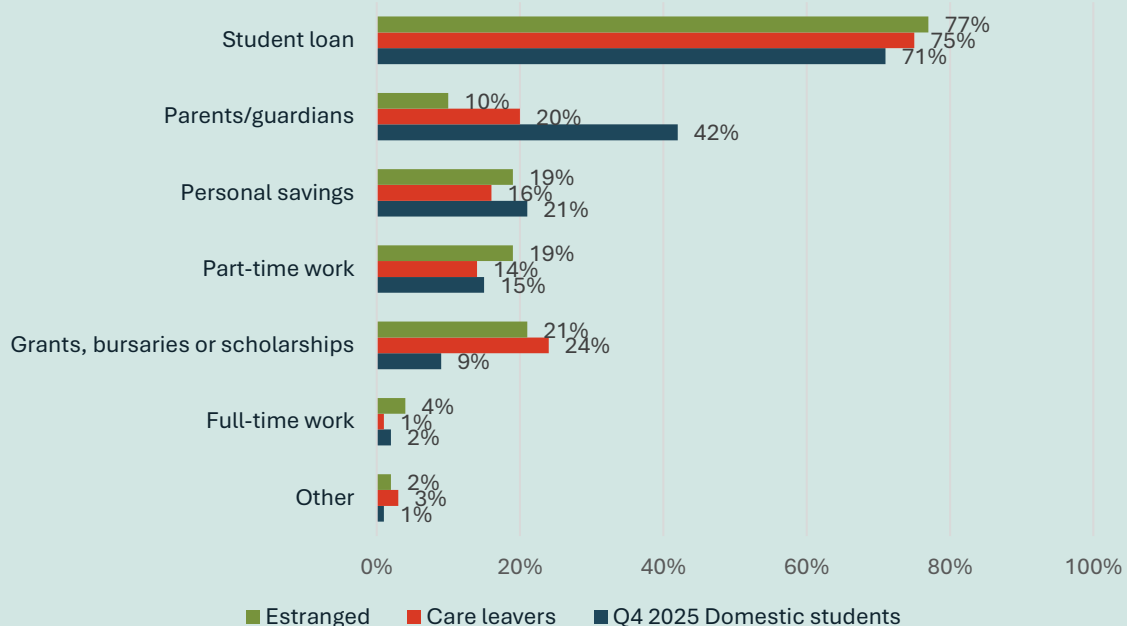
*'I was a bit under my first rent payment, but he wasn't too angry about it and they haven't continually pressed through or given me any additional stress. I just let them know that I don't get much help from my parents and I was only a little bit under the first rent payment. The second one is after December and January, so I still got a little bit more time to try and gather funds to meet the requirements. But the understanding in the most part when something does happen, if you e-mail them, they'll be able to be open.'* **ESTRANGED STUDENT**

## FAMILY INVOLVEMENT IN THE DECISION ABOUT WHERE TO LIVE



Both groups are significantly less likely to rely on parents or guardians to fund their accommodation and are more likely to use student loans and grants/bursaries instead. This pattern is particularly pronounced among estranged students, who are also more likely to depend on income from employment to meet their housing costs.

## HOW FUNDING ACCOMMODATION



## PRIORITIES

In line with what we see nationally, care-experienced and estranged students prioritise the same things when looking for their accommodation. Proximity to study is the top criterion, followed by budget/price, the bedroom, availability of an ensuite and the condition and quality of the accommodation.

However, there are some notable differences in what influences the decision for care-experienced and estranged students:

- **More likely to report having no choice in their accommodation**, with qualitative feedback indicating that limited availability, personal circumstances, or last-minute applications can restrict options.
- **Increased likelihood of selecting ‘Other’ as a decision factor**, often referring to specific needs such as car parking, the ability to live with pets or partners, or accessibility or mental-health-related requirements.
- **Estranged students show a stronger preference for flexible contract arrangements**, suggesting a need for greater adaptability in housing options.
- **‘Safety and security’ is a comparatively lower priority** for both groups relative to the average domestic student.

## Accommodation Experience.

### BOOKING AND MOVING-IN

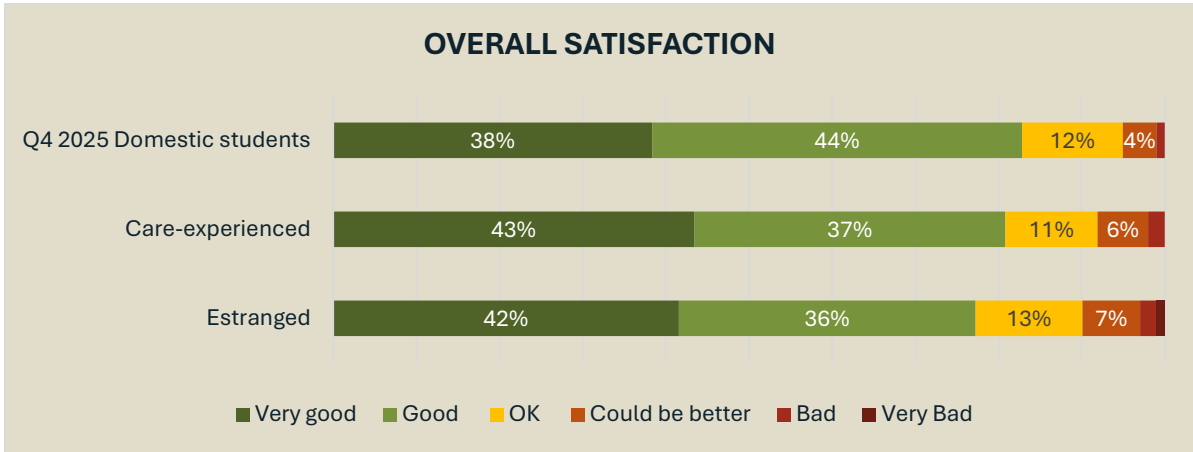
Satisfaction with the accommodation-booking process is broadly comparable for care-experienced and estranged students, with both groups reporting similarly positive experiences to the wider student population. However, notable gaps emerge at the point of moving in, where satisfaction levels are significantly lower for these students.

% SATISFIED (RATE VERY GOOD/GOOD)	Q4 2025	CARE-EXPERIENCED	ESTRANGED
Booking experience	76%	73%	74%
Moving in experience	79%	75%	74%

Looking at the moving-in experience in more detail, the biggest discrepancies are in the information students receive, specifically around arrival instructions and the ease with which the accommodation can be found, which are rated significantly lower for both care-experienced and estranged students. Scores for care-experienced students are notably lower for these elements, as well as for welcome events. Estranged students are less satisfied with the welcome they receive from residents.

% SATISFIED (RATE VERY GOOD/GOOD)	Q4 2025	CARE-EXPERIENCED	ESTRANGED
Arrival instructions	77%	69%	72%
Cleanliness	72%	68%	68%
Ease the accommodation can be found	81%	73%	77%
Online induction	71%	65%	66%
Parking	51%	48%	48%
Staff Welcome	82%	78%	79%
Welcome from residents	70%	67%	65%
Welcome events	68%	63%	66%

## Overall satisfaction.



Generally, satisfaction levels for estranged and care-experienced students are good, with nearly 8 in 10 rating their experience positively. Estranged students are significantly more likely to report lower satisfaction with their overall experience than their non-estranged peers. Satisfaction is slightly lower for care-experienced students, but this is not significant.

'My accommodation has been really great with me because of my mental health and the support they've provided to me as I go through these stressful times.'  
**ESTRANGED STUDENT**

'Before I moved in, I was homeless due to a combination of factors. The only reason I have a place to stay right now is because of Dara, the housing manager. He went above and beyond for me, and it's something I'll never forget.'  
**CARE-EXPERIENCED STUDENT**

## UNEXPECTED NPS PATTERNS

One of the largest performance gaps between care-experienced and estranged students and their peers appears in the Net Promoter Score (NPS), which measures how likely students are to recommend their accommodation.

LIKELIHOOD TO RECOMMEND - NPS	Q4 2025 DOMESTIC STUDENTS	CARE-EXPERIENCED	ESTRANGED
NPS	+18.4	+10.1	+10.9

Over 10% of care-experienced students give a score of 0–3, compared with only 4% of domestic students. This is unexpected, as care-experienced and estranged students give higher “very good” ratings overall.

A closer look at the data shows that, for most students, satisfaction levels increase the further up the NPS scale you go. However, this pattern does not hold for care-experienced or estranged students. In fact, satisfaction is higher among those who selected ‘0’ than among those who selected 1–6.

Nearly half of care-experienced or estranged students who selected ‘0’ still rated their accommodation as “very good” or “good”, compared with only 17% nationally. This suggests they may be interpreting the question differently—potentially taking the reference to recommending accommodation to a “friend or family member” more literally.

As a result, NPS may not accurately reflect how well accommodation meets the needs of care-experienced and estranged students.

Overall, care-experienced and estranged students tend to rate most accommodation features similarly to their peers, although several notable differences emerge:

- **Estranged students are significantly more likely to rate laundry facilities negatively** (14% rating them very bad/bad compared with 6% on average), and the same pattern is observed for **bathroom facilities** (11% vs. 6%).
- **Estranged students are three times more likely to rate relationships with others in their accommodation negatively**, indicating greater challenges with peer interaction or community integration.
- **Both care-experienced and estranged students provide significantly lower ratings for the ‘care and support’ they receive**, highlighting a potential area for targeted improvement.
- **Care-experienced students are twice as likely to rate the overall management of their accommodation negatively**, potentially suggesting a greater need for communication, responsiveness, or general service quality.

# Struggles and well-being.

## WELL-BEING

At GSL, we use the MHI-5 (Mental Health Inventory-5), a validated 5-item self-report questionnaire assessing well-being. Respondents are asked to consider their experience over the past month against five different criteria. Scores range from 0 to 100, where higher scores indicate better mental health.

An analysis of MHI-5 scores reveals significantly lower well-being levels among care-experienced and estranged students, highlighting the need for enhanced well-being support for these groups.

	ALL Q4 2025	DOMESTIC STUDENTS Q4 2025	CARE-EXPERIENCED	ESTRANGED
MHI-5 score	61.9	60.4	53.3	51.3

Both care-experienced and estranged students are significantly more likely to say their accommodation is having a negative impact on their well-being.



## STRUGGLES

Care-experienced students report fewer difficulties overall compared with estranged students, who appear to face a higher level of challenges. For estranged students, the most significant struggle is *having enough money to get by*, whereas this ranks third among care-experienced students and seventh in the wider student population. Among care-experienced students, the leading concern aligns with the national picture—*stress*

and anxiety—followed by difficulties in securing part-time work. Although both groups report higher-than-average difficulty with managing their finances, this issue is considerably more pronounced among estranged students.

A notable difference for both care-experienced and estranged students, when compared with the national average, is the substantially higher proportion reporting struggles with *depression, other mental health issues, and alcohol or substance misuse*.

% (RANKING)	ALL Q4 2025	ALL DOMESTIC STUDENTS Q4 2025	CARE-EXPERIENCED	ESTRANGED
Stress/anxiety	43% (1)	47% (1)	52% (1)	58% (2)
Finding part-time work	42% (2)	46% (2)	48% (2)	49%
Keeping up with the workload	41% (3)	45% (3)	42%	51% (3)
Meeting new people	37%	37%	37%	43%
Budgeting effectively	35%	39%	35%	38%
Making the most of university	35%	37%	37%	41%
Having enough money to get by	33% (7)	39% (4)	45% (3)	59% (1)
Having the confidence to do the things I want to do	30%	34%	36%	39%
Understanding the course	27%	30%	31%	34%
Work-life balance	27%	29%	30%	36%
Homesickness	24%	24%	19%	14%
Loneliness	23%	26%	29%	31%
Relationships	22%	23%	27%	29%
Depression	17%	19%	30%	35%
Physical health	16%	17%	22%	23%
Getting on with those in my accommodation	15%	16%	19%	22%
Commuting	13%	11%	19%	20%
Knowing where to find support	10%	11%	17%	17%
Other mental health issues	10%	12%	23%	26%
Dealing with the demands of my job	9%	9%	12%	16%
Alcohol/substance abuse	4%	5%	9%	9%
Discrimination	2%	1%	4%	4%
Bullying	1%	1%	3%	3%

'I've experienced a few mental health difficulties and wanted to say how much I appreciate the kindness and support from both the reception team and accommodation management. They have consistently checked up on me, communicated clearly through emails and shown genuine care towards me through difficult times. Overall, they have been amazing and made a real difference to my wellbeing whilst living here.' CARE-EXPERIENCED STUDENT

## Social experience.

Most care-experienced and estranged students are having a positive experience in their accommodation, with the majority enjoying socialising and no real differences in their sense of community or sense of belonging compared to the average. However, it is worth noting the significantly higher levels of conflict that these students experience, as well as estranged students finding it more difficult to make close friendships.

% AGREE	Q4 2025	CARE-EXPERIENCED	ESTRANGED
I have formed close friendships with the people I live with	62%	59%	57%
I enjoy socialising in my accommodation	68%	65%	63%
There is a strong sense of community where I live	67%	68%	66%
I feel a strong sense of belonging where I live	61%	57%	57%
I regularly experience social conflict in my accommodation	18%	27%	28%

### EXTRA-CURRICULAR EXPERIENCE

Estranged and care-experienced students are significantly more likely to say they would like to be more involved in the extra-curricular experience in their accommodation, but things are stopping them. Estranged students are also significantly more likely to say they are 'just at university to study' and aren't interested in getting involved.

Barriers to participation largely stem from personal factors such as low confidence and anxiety. However, estranged students are also considerably more likely to highlight financial pressures and employment commitments as reasons they cannot get involved.

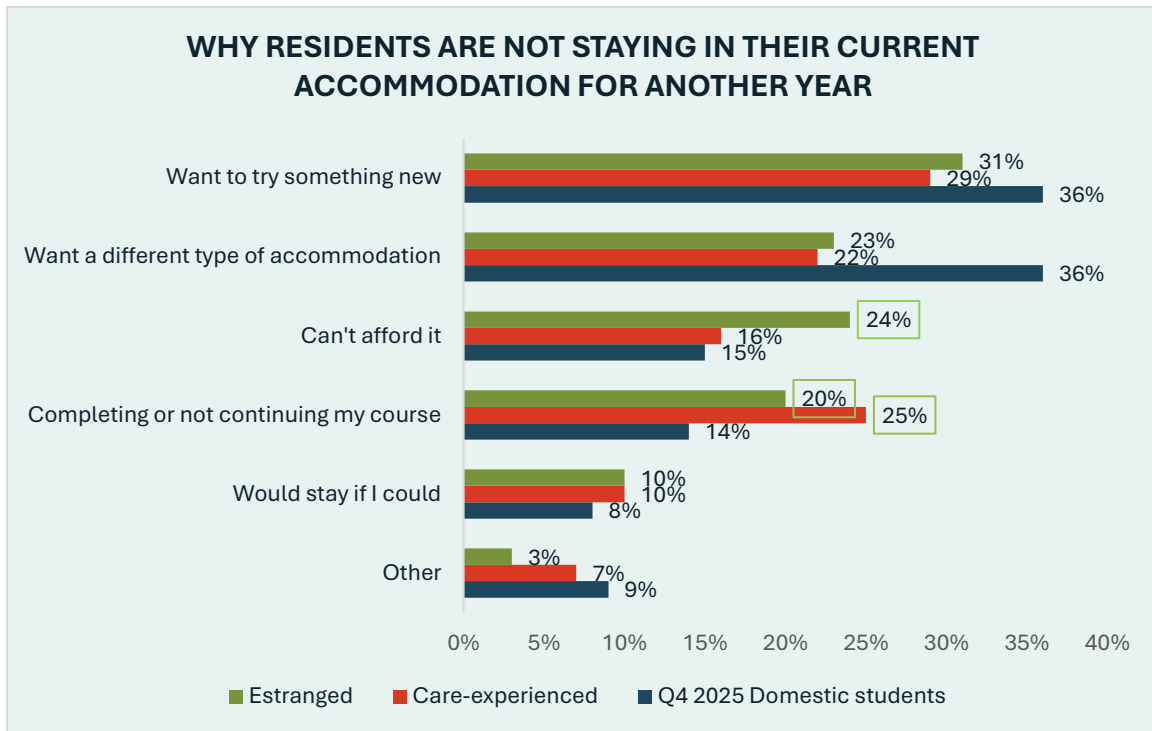
When considering the activities students would like to engage with more, work experience emerges as the most preferred option, reflecting national trends. Care-experienced students show a significantly higher interest in gaming-related activities, while estranged students are more attracted towards academic masterclasses and employability or entrepreneurship workshops. Both groups express lower interest in club nights or parties than average and are more likely to favour life skills workshops.

## Future intentions.

Overall, care-experienced and estranged students show a greater likelihood of remaining in their current accommodation for the following year.

STAYING IN THEIR CURRENT ACCOMMODATION FOR ANOTHER YEAR	Q4 2025 DOMESTIC STUDENTS	CARE-EXPERIENCED	ESTRANGED
Yes	17%	31%	30%
No	50%	35%	35%
Not sure	33%	34%	35%

Among those who plan to move, financial pressures and decisions not to continue or complete their course are more frequently cited as key reasons.



This pattern aligns with wider data on withdrawal, which indicates that both groups are significantly more likely to be seriously considering dropping out of university - around one in three, compared with fewer than one in five students nationally.

AGREE - 'I HAVE SERIOUSLY CONSIDERED DROPPING OUT OF UNIVERSITY'			
Q4 2025	Q4 2025 DOMESTIC STUDENTS	CARE-EXPERIENCED	ESTRANGED
19%	21%	32%	34%

## **Conclusion.**

The findings from this analysis highlight that while most care-experienced and estranged students report broadly positive accommodation experiences, they nevertheless face distinct and persistent challenges across their housing journey. These students encounter lower well-being, significantly higher levels of financial strain, and a greater likelihood of mental health difficulties, including depression and other mental health issues, compared with the wider student population. They also report more barriers during the move-in process, reduced social integration, and lower satisfaction with care and support, all of which shape a more fragile and complex accommodation experience.

The evidence also suggests that the stakes are particularly high for these groups, with around one in three seriously considering withdrawing from university - far above the national average. Their accommodation environment, therefore, plays a critical role not only in their day-to-day stability but also in their ability to remain engaged in higher education.

Overall, the analysis emphasises an urgent need for more targeted, proactive, and consistent support, spanning pre-arrival communication, community-building, financial flexibility, well-being provision, and responsive management practices – our recommendations for PBSA providers and universities are set out below.

# Recommendations.

## 1. TAILOR PRE-ARRIVAL AND MOVE-IN SUPPORT

The biggest gaps in experience for both groups occur **before and during moving in**, particularly around **arrival instructions, ease of locating the accommodation, online inductions, and welcome events** (all notably lower than the domestic average).

**Recommendation:** Incentivise students to share their circumstances in advance of arrival by offering an 'assisted arrival' channel, for example, and a more personalised pre-arrival contact. Consider the opportunity for close collaboration with the university named contact for care experienced and estranged students.

As highlighted in the [Unite Foundation Blueprint](#) work, offering early check-in options for care experienced and estranged students, who will have faced housing insecurity or homelessness, can be beneficial. If there are 'quiet arrival slots' or flexible arrival windows, supported by one to one helpers, these can also support students other vulnerable groups. We also recommend referring to GSL and CUBO's 'Closing the Gap' report, which can be found on the CUBO website and focuses on the experiences of vulnerable student groups.

## 2. IMPROVE SOCIAL INTEGRATION AND REDUCE CONFLICT

Both groups report **lower satisfaction with resident welcome** and **higher levels of social conflict**, and estranged students find it harder to form close friendships. At the same time, both groups are **more likely to want to engage in extracurricular activities**, but face barriers such as **low confidence, anxiety, financial pressures and employment commitments**.

**Recommendation:** We encourage collaboration across university services, like finance and careers, to host practical skills sessions *within* accommodation spaces as a low barrier means of engaging students early in their student life and at a point of need. These findings should be shared with resident life and student ambassador groups to self-audit their programmes for inclusiveness across working patterns, beliefs, and neurodiversity inclusion.

Community cohesion is also usefully covered in the 2025 CUBO and GSL report 'Building Connections'. In addition, Unite Foundation supports the All of Us community for care-experienced and estranged students, which comes with funding to enable meetups and events free to students. The same website hosts details of the HE Peer Network, again free for professionals to join.

### 3. EXPAND FINANCIAL FLEXIBILITY AND SUPPORT

'**Having enough money to get by**' is the top issue for estranged students and a major issue for care-experienced students. Both groups obviously rely less on parents and more on loans, bursaries, and employment.

**Recommendation:** Offer flexible payment plans and provide transparent, early cost communication. Expand eligibility or awareness of hardship funds, bursaries, rent reductions, or emergency financial assistance.

Research<sup>1</sup> from The Unite Foundation shows that funding accommodation support increases progression rates for those from a care-experienced and estranged background. Those providing accommodation services could consider how they might provide financial scholarships or bursaries to subsidise the cost of accommodation.

Local Authorities have a role for a proportion of these students, and universities should endeavour to support students in securing their entitlements around finances and accommodation provision.

Consider having time for personal conversations with each student to develop their 'personal housing plan' – a conversation based on supporting housing needs, but that often unlocks wider needs that better allow you to support students through early intervention.

### 4. ENHANCE WELL-BEING SUPPORT AND EARLY INTERVENTION

The MHI-5 (Mental Health Inventory-5), a validated 5-item self-report questionnaire assessing well-being, shows significantly lower well-being among care-experienced and estranged students, and both groups are far more likely to struggle with **depression, mental health difficulties, and substance misuse**.

**Recommendation:** Strengthen mental-health outreach, staff training, and proactive check-ins. Offering **proactive check-ins** during key pressure periods (arrival month, exam seasons, winter months), when students really need it.

### 5. IMPROVE CARE, SUPPORT, AND MANAGEMENT RESPONSIVENESS

Both groups give significantly lower ratings for **care and support**, and care-experienced students are twice as likely to rate **overall management** negatively. Estranged students also rate **laundry facilities** and **bathroom facilities** significantly lower than their peers.

**Recommendation:** Provide staff training on the contexts and barriers faced by these students, and, where possible, prioritise responses to these students, particularly in relation to laundry and bathroom complaints, utilising a trauma-informed approach.

Increase the consistency and visibility of support through dedicated contacts and clearer communication standards - offering direct access to relevant management staff within the buildings - to build connection and trust.

## 6. INCREASE CHOICE AND FLEXIBILITY IN TENANCY OPTIONS

Care-experienced and estranged students are more likely to report **having no choice in their accommodation**, and estranged students especially prioritise **flexible contracts**

**Recommendation:** Provide more adaptable contract types and room-move options to support students who report having limited accommodation options or who experience changing personal circumstances. Consider increasing the availability of **special request options**, such as pet-friendly rooms, accessibility adaptations, or parking for these students.

Offering guaranteed year-round accommodation, including the summers, is a key part of building a safe and stable home at university for care-experienced and estranged students, and helps address one of the biggest challenges for students in these groups - where to live for the 12–14 week summer break, when a stable home is far from guaranteed.

## 7. SUPPORT RETENTION AND SUCCESS

Around **one in three** care-experienced and estranged students are seriously considering dropping out, compared with fewer than one in five nationally. Accommodation is just one aspect of what can be a complex intersectionality of factors; however, all stakeholders have a shared goal of ensuring the academic progression and success of these marginalised student populations

**Recommendation:** Consider how you could improve your impact with care-experienced and estranged students through taking part in structured frameworks that support thinking in these areas, across a range of areas, as well as accommodation.

The NNECL Quality Mark enables institutions to assess their current practice, identify gaps in provision and establish areas for development through an institutional self-assessment with support and review by a NNECL Assessor.

The Care Leaver Covenant is a Department for Education initiative aimed at supporting those leaving care to live independently. Many universities are already signatories. Unite Students has recently joined this initiative as the first PBSA, and we would recommend all other commercial accommodation providers to examine the Care Leaver Covenant and develop their services for care-experienced and estranged students, reflecting their own contexts.

**To get involved in the  
Index  
head to the GSL website:  
[gslglobal.com/index](https://gslglobal.com/index)  
to register.**

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