

Student Belonging through Community

Blueprint for a #HomeAtUniversity

Room

6

of 8

The Big Idea

Imagine arriving at university and feeling like everyone else already has their people. A family to call. Friends from home. A place to go during weekends, holidays, and quieter times of year.

For many care-experienced and estranged students, those connections can be harder to find.

The Big Idea behind Room 6 of the Blueprint is simple:



Students should have opportunities to build meaningful connections, community, and a sense of belonging throughout their time at university.

Why This Matters

University success is about accommodation, finances, and academic experience. It's also about belonging.

Care-experienced and estranged students may be more likely to experience:



The perception that they are different from other students, and a stigma of shame about their lived experience



Limited or no networks to turn to for emotional support and connection



Difficult experiences during holidays, celebratory periods and university closures



Challenges finding a commonality with others and their 'place' within university life



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These feelings don't just surface on arrival. They can become particularly real when campus becomes quieter:

Summer vacations

Christmas and winter breaks

Bank holidays

Graduation periods

Weekends and evenings



A student can have a room in halls and still feel isolated. A #HomeAtUniversity is about community connection as well as accommodation.

What Good Looks Like

When this room is "built", universities and Students' Unions actively create opportunities for belonging through community.

Strong approaches include:



Care-experienced and estranged student societies, networks, or liberation groups



Informal social opportunities throughout the year using halls and other university spaces as both communication channels and hosting resource



Activities in accommodation during holiday periods, inviting private residential students in too, to make campus a vibrant space full of social connection.



Activity that focuses on social connection for its own sake as well as practical 'need', with wide opportunity for students to shape content and lead.



Online communities that help students feel seen and stay connected locally, regionally and nationally



The key shift: From "Students know support exists." to "Students belong to a community."



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In Practice: University Of Bristol

At University of Bristol University, support for care-experienced and estranged students includes and goes beyond practical help.

The university recognises that belonging and connection are essential components of student success.

As part of its approach, the university:

- ✓ Supports a Care Leavers and Estranged Students Society which hosts informal social events throughout the year in the city and on campus including halls
- ✓ Maintains contact during vacation periods and collaborates with accommodation teams and other colleagues to identify periods when additional connection may be valuable
- ✓ Creates opportunities for peer connection in halls and faculties through signposting and trust building
- ✓ Encourages students to shape activities and support opportunities



The focus isn't about organising events. It's on enabling successive cohorts of students to find and continually build belonging through community.

Community Beyond the Campus

Community doesn't have to stop at the university gates.

The Unite Foundation supports All of Us – a UK-wide community exclusively for care-experienced and estranged students. All of Us provides routes – online and in real life – for care-experienced and estranged students to connect with one another.



All of Us

Students can access:

- 👉 Meetups and themed events – online, in halls, or in the local area
- 📰 An exclusive student-edited newsletter
- 🎁 Freebies and opportunities
- ✍️ Student-authored blogs and resources such as 'Top tips for summer'
- 🌐 A national network of students and graduates
- 📢 Opportunities to organise, collaborate, and influence change together

For students who may be the only care-experienced or estranged student they know, communities like All of Us can be transformational. A student's community can exist on campus, online, locally, and nationally.

What to Watch For

Community isn't just organising events.

Students may still struggle to engage if:

- ❌ Activities feel tokenistic
- ❌ Activity only appears once at the start of the first academic year
- ❌ Opportunities are poorly promoted or are entirely staff-led
- ❌ Students are expected to create community entirely without resources
- ❌ Community disappears when it is valued the most in holidays and quieter periods



Belonging is built through consistent and authentic relationship building, not one-off activities.

What This Means For SU Officers

This room is often where Students' Unions can have the greatest influence.

Ask your institution:

- ? How are care-experienced and estranged students supported to build connections?
- ? Does this include information and opportunity for connections where they live?
- ? Is there a care-experienced and estranged student network, society, or community space?
- ? What happens during holiday periods when campus life slows down?
- ? Are students aware of communities like All of Us?
- ? Who is responsible for fostering opportunities for connection?
- ? How are students shaping community activity themselves – how can this be amplified?



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And importantly:

 Champion inclusive communities and peer interaction

 Encourage care-experienced and estranged student groups where they exist

 Create opportunities for networks to emerge where they don't, including in accommodation

 Think about the quieter moments in the university calendar, how can students living year-round continue to find social warmth

 Promote local and national opportunities for connection

Not every university will have enough students to sustain a dedicated society or network and that's okay. The goal isn't necessarily to create a new group. The goal is to ensure students have opportunities to connect with other students who understand their experiences, whether that's through local activity, wider liberation communities, or national networks like All of Us.

Key Takeaway

This isn't just about events. It's about:

Belonging

Friendship

Connection

And knowing that you're not facing university alone

A safe and stable #HomeAtUniversity isn't only a place to stay.

It's a community that stays with you. Everyone needs somewhere to belong.



No student should feel like they're navigating university on their own.



Next: Room 7

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