

Who Gets to Advocate?

Supporting Care-Experienced & Estranged Students

Background

Care-experienced and estranged students have often had to fight for support in systems that weren't designed with their experiences in mind. Too often, the responsibility for identifying problems and pushing for change falls on the very students most negatively affected by those problems, and therefore with the least resources to hand.



You don't need lived experience to be an effective advocate. But you do need to listen, learn, and use your position responsibly.

Why This Matters

Care-experienced and estranged students are often best placed to identify barriers in university systems. But that doesn't mean they should be expected to fix them alone.

This can result in students repeatedly having to:



Explain why year-round accommodation matters



Justify why rent guarantor requirements create barriers



Share deeply personal experiences to prove a problem exists



Convince institutions that their needs are legitimate



A student's story can help create understanding. It should not be the price of being heard.



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What Good Looks Like

When this is working well, advocacy is based on allyship, not saviourism.

Allyship Looks Like:

-  Listening to students' experiences where possible
-  Working alongside students wherever possible, not speaking over them
-  Using your platform to amplify lived experience from your own and other universities
-  Challenging systems and policies that create barriers
-  Sharing power and creating lasting change

Saviourism Looks Like:

- "I know what's best for these students"
- "I'm going to fix this problem for them"
- Speaking on behalf of students without involving them if it was possible to do so
- Taking ownership of work that could be collaborative



The key shift: From "I am the voice for students" to "lived experience from national or local sources informs all activity."



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In Practice: What Good Advocacy Looks Like

As a Students' Union Officer, you advocate on lots of issues that you may not personally experience:

Accessibility

Mental health

Financial hardship

Housing

Academic policy

Discrimination

Care-experienced and estranged students are no different. Instead of asking:

"Do I have lived experience?"

Ask:

"Have I engaged with the lived experiences available to me?"

"Am I reflecting student priorities and evidence?"

"Am I using my influence effectively?"

Lived experiences might come directly from students at your university, but they can also come from research, Unite Foundation resources, case studies, and evidence gathered through the Blueprint.



Good advocacy draws local insight, if available, as well as wider evidence.



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What To Watch For

It's important to centre lived experience without placing all responsibility on students.

If your institution has:

A care-experienced and estranged students' network

Student campaigners

A liberation group discussing these issues

Students willing to share their experiences

You should:

Involve them in discussions

Invite input on priorities

Support their campaigns

Ensure their views reach decision-makers

But remember:

Students should never feel obliged to repeatedly share difficult personal experiences just to secure basic support

Never assume that change must wait until students are prepared to tell those stories

Don't let the absence of a pool of vocal students to consult with discourage you from the task



Research, evidence, and sector practice can all help identify barriers that students may not yet feel able to raise themselves.



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What If No One Is Raising the Issue?

Not every Students' Union will have an active care-experienced and estranged students' network and not every student will feel comfortable identifying themselves publicly. That doesn't mean the need isn't there.

There are many reasons why students may not be visible:

 They don't know support exists  They worry about stigma or judgement

 They haven't formally disclosed their circumstances

 There are relatively small numbers at your institution

 The issue simply hasn't been discussed before



The absence of a campaign isn't evidence that there's no problem.

If no students are actively raising these issues, officers can still:

 Ask what data the university holds on care-experienced and estranged students

 Review existing accommodation policies and support offers

 Use the Blueprint Audit Workbook to identify gaps

 Speak with widening participation, student support, and accommodation teams

 Raise awareness of existing support and create opportunities for students to engage safely

The Unite Foundation's research, case studies, student stories, and Blueprint resources can also help officers understand common experiences and barriers.



While nothing replaces listening to students at your own institution, these resources provide a valuable starting point and insight into issues that students may not yet feel able to raise themselves.



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What This Means for SU Officers

You have access to spaces that many students don't.

That might include:



University committees



Senior leaders



Accommodation teams



Policy and decision-making groups

Use that access to:



Listen to students where opportunities exist



Learn from research, case studies, and sector evidence



Use Blueprint resources to understand common barriers and effective solutions



Build campaigns with students where possible



Raise issues where decisions are made



Create sustainable change that lasts beyond individual campaigns

Remember:

Good advocacy is not a choice between lived experience and evidence. The strongest advocacy uses both.

Good advocacy isn't about waiting until a problem is brought to you. It's about using evidence, insight, and student experience to identify where barriers may exist and helping remove them.



The goal isn't for one student to keep fighting forever. The goal is for the institution to change.



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Reflection Checklist

Before starting this work, ask yourself:

Representation & Insight

Have I spoken to care-experienced and estranged students where possible?

Have I engaged with relevant research, case studies, or Blueprint resources?

Am I reflecting both student experiences and available evidence?

Am I avoiding assumptions?

Power

Am I creating opportunities for students to influence decisions where possible?

Am I using my position to remove barriers?

Am I using available evidence to strengthen the case for change?

Am I sharing ownership of successes?

Sustainability

Does this work reduce the burden on students?

Does this work avoid relying on students repeatedly sharing difficult experiences?

Will progress continue after my term ends?



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Key Takeaway

This isn't about becoming the "voice" of care-experienced and estranged students. It's about:

Respecting lived experience

Using evidence responsibly

Sharing power

Creating space for students to influence decisions

Building systems that don't rely on individual students repeatedly explaining why support is needed

The Blueprint exists because thousands of student experiences, research findings, and examples of effective practice have already been gathered and where students aren't visible or organised, it's about having the curiosity to ask: "Who might be missing from this conversation?"

You don't need lived experience to care about injustice. You do need humility, curiosity, and a commitment to ensuring the people most affected are heard, respected, and included.



Your role is to use that insight, alongside the experiences of students at your own institution, to help drive meaningful change.

What Next?

Throughout the Blueprint, you'll find practical ideas, evidence, case studies, and tools to help improve the student experience.

As you explore them, remember:



The most effective change happens with students, informed by evidence, and supported by action.