

# Independent & Estranged Students

## Transcript



## Lesley Carbro

Good afternoon, everybody and thank you for attending this final session on Independent and Estranged Students. I'm Lesley ... and I'm one of the two estrangement assessors based at SLC in Darlington. And whilst I sit as part of the independent team, I deal with the more complex cases of estrangement, and cases where the student is, for whatever reason, unable to provide us the types of evidence that we would normally ask for.

And we should be moving on, bear with me. Sorry, it's decided to blank. Me and technology don't work terribly well together. But today, what we're going to be looking at are the independent reasons under which a student can be awarded status. And these are for students who are under the age of 25 on the first day of the academic year. Any students over 25 are automatically awarded independent status without having to fit into any of these categories. We'll then have a quick look at the evidence requirements that we ask for. We'll have a quick overview of estrangement and the role of the estrangement assessors. And then I shall leave us with some details of how to contact the independent team and the estrangement assessors.

At the end, if we have any time, we will be able to do a quick Q&A session. But for those joining remotely, and for the people actually within the room, you can submit questions during the session on the app, they will be passed over to me at the end of the seminar and I will get back to you as quickly as possible on those. Other than that, when we're all back at work next week, do take advantage of the contact details I'll be leaving and get in touch with any queries or if you need to talk about any of their cases, okay.

So, students could apply for independent status under any one of these headings. And the first one is where these students are estranged from both parents. And the important point here is that it is both of the parents that we need to know about. And when we talk about parents throughout the presentation, we're referring to adoptive and biological parents only. So students who have legal guardians, or anybody that they may live with under residency orders, they don't count. We're only interested in biological and adoptive parents.

We will then have a look at care leavers. And these are students who at some point have been under the legal care or custody of their local authority.

We then have self support, which is where students can demonstrate that they have supported themselves from earnings, benefits for a period of 36 months prior to the first day of the first academic year of the course.

And then we have a category of parents can't be found or unable to be contacted. And this is probably the least common of the estrangement reasons that we come across. The most common one that we do actually find is where a student's parents or parent is unable to supply the details in support of the application due to perhaps some mental medical conditions, physical or mental impairments that mean they're not able to produce their details. And again, we'll look at that in a moment.

Students can apply for independent status where both parents are deceased, or where a sponsoring parent is deceased. And for sponsoring parents deceased, these are cases where the student has already had an application supported by one parent, one parent, one sponsor, who's then subsequently died. So once we've confirmed that death, we can award independent status for that particular year, the year in which the death occurs, but then for the following academic year and subsequent academic years, we will want to know what the situation is with the remaining parent and whether they can support the application or whether the students may be independent under one of the other reasons, and that will more than likely be estrangement.

And then finally, we have the category of parents outside of the EU or not practical to contact them. And the most common scenarios for these are cases where the parent is in a country of unrest, you know, civil unrest, or political disruption and where supplying their details may place them in jeopardy, or it's simply not practical to contact them because of their whereabouts. Okay.

So if we look at parents can't be found, if it's simply a reason that the student can't find their parents, they don't know where they are, they may have been separated at some point, then we would be looking for a letter from a professional third party, just detailing what the situation is and confirming that. Where it's a medical condition that prevents the support of this sponsor from providing their information, then firstly, we would look to see if there is a power of attorney or a deputy ordership in place. If that's the case, then we would expect that attorney or deputy to be able to provide the details on behalf of the parents. Where that's not the case, then again, a letter would suffice just outlining that the sponsor is unable to provide their details or are incapable of providing their details due to a medical condition or impairment.

So when we look for estrangement, the easiest way of supplying evidence for this is by completing an estrangement form, otherwise, again, it's a letter from a professional third party detailing the relationship to the students and the length of time that they've known them. Now usually, we would look, ideally for this to be 12 months, but you know, life isn't that black and white, situations arise. So where it's under 12 months, we can still accept it, we just look at it on a case-by-case basis. And the main exception to this 12 months is also for estrangement forms completed by HEPs. And in these circumstances, as long as you are happy that through your discussions or any evidence you may have seen from the students, and you're comfortable and confident that in your eyes that student is estranged, then we will accept evidence without you having had any prior relationship or prior knowledge of the students' circumstances.

For care leaver status, this is usually a fairly easy one to obtain evidence for because if a student is still in the care leaver system, they're normally still in touch with a support worker or a social worker allocated to them. So in these cases, we would generally be looking for a letter from that local authority, that social worker to confirm the situation.

And in this, we do need them to confirm the dates that the students was in care and we'll see why in a moment or two, and to confirm that that student has not returned to the care or legal care of the parents prior to the start of the year.

Where both parents are deceased, again, ideally what we would like to see are copies of the parents' death certificates together with the student's birth certificate. And the reason we asked for the birth certificate is just so we can marry that relationship and to support that it is actually the parents. Where death certificates can't be provided, again, it's just a letter from a third party.

Contributing to sponsor deceased, which I mentioned earlier. In the year that the said sponsor dies, again, we want to be looking for a death certificate or a letter from a third party before we can award independent status for that particular year.

And then where we move on to parents abroad. Again, it's a letter from a third party basically outlining their situation, confirming that the parents do live outside of the EU and explaining why an assessment of their financial circumstances could place them in jeopardy, or just explain the situation as to why it's not practical to contact them.

And then finally we're looking at self support, and again, we'll have a little bit more detail as we move on. Here we're looking for evidence that the student has supported themselves for 36 months. And this would normally be financial evidence, P60s, payslips, HMRC statement of earnings, letters from an employer, evidence of benefits received. And if the student originally applies under the self support section, the application form does ask for a breakdown of their employment history. If that hasn't been completed at the time of application, we would also request that alongside the financial evidence that's mentioned there.

So when we talk about professional and acceptable third parties, we can provide a list to the students to give them an idea of who would be ideal to provide the evidence. This is by no means exhaustive; it is just to give an indication of who would be an acceptable third party. Where there's nobody on that list then we're still happy to accept evidence from somebody who is a person of good standing in the community, as long as that person is fully aware of the student's situation and is not related to them and doesn't live in the same house. So again, we're trying to rule out the evidence from family and friends, it doesn't need to be somebody individually, independent of the family situation.

So as I said, for some support, it is evidence that the students supported themselves any 36 months prior to the start of the course. Now, that does not have to be a continuous 36 months. So the student could have worked for nine months in one year, had a period on benefits then worked for another five months and another year, as long as those periods when added together do add up to 36 months or more. And the regulations surrounding that are very black and white, there's no wiggle room there, it has to be 36 months. And as I say the evidence that we would normally ask for is financial evidence in the form of payslips, P60s, that type of thing.

So looking at care leavers, as I said earlier, we would normally expect a letter from a social worker or somebody in the care leaving team. And this needs to confirm that the student has not been under the legal care of their parents, and for the three months or more has been in the care or custody of the local authority, or has been given accommodation by the local authority, and that would generally be some kind of a group home or foster care. And that's why I said we do ask for the period that they've been in care and the dates to make sure they meet that three-month criteria.

What is not covered by care leaver status is where the student has been in a private fostering arrangement. So you know, they may have been put into the care of another family member and care leavers status doesn't cover where the students been given supported accommodation, and that could be from the likes of the foyer, YMCA, homeless or youth charities.

And here we have an example of a mocked-up letter that we would expect for care leaver. And in this situation, it's from somebody at the local authorities telling us that the student has been a care leaver, and it's telling us that it's in section 24 of the Children's Act. The students been looked after by the local authorities since the age of 13. And that, on turning 18 as moved into the care leaver system and is currently being supported by them. It goes on to tell us that student has not returned to the legal care of his parents, and that he will continue to receive support from the care leaver team until his 25th birthday. And it is quite typical that support does continue until 25 when the student remains in education.

So moving on to estrangement. Excuse me, this is where the relationship between the student and both of their biological or adoptive parents has completely broken down. There's no contact with them and that situation isn't likely to change. There's not likely to be any reconciliation. And as I mentioned earlier, the easiest way to confirm this is by completing an estrangement form, otherwise a side letter from a professional third party. And what is not covered by estrangement is where the parents are simply refusing to provide their financial information in support of the application. And sadly, we do see a lot of cases where that's the situation. But we have to work to the quite strict regulations with student finance. and unfortunately, that doesn't meet the criteria. Nor can a student be regarded as estranged if they've simply moved out of the family home. It must be a total breakdown of the relationship with their parents.

So I've made reference to the estrangement form a couple of times there and I'm sure that some of you will be very familiar with this. But for those who aren't, these are the sections that need to be completed by the third party providing that evidence.

So the first section is just providing the third party's details, including full contact details, and how long they've known the students. The second part is then asking when they became aware of the estrangement. And then the two important questions as far as we're concerned are whether they can confirm whether there's been any contact in the last 12 months and if they took yes to that, then we do ask for a little bit more information. And this is because very limited contact with the parents can be acceptable in certain circumstances. You may have a student who's got younger siblings who still live in the family home. And whilst the student's relationship with the parents is broken down, they want to maintain contact and relationship with these younger siblings. So in those circumstances, there may be some limited contact just to facilitate that to arrange visits or phone calls with the younger siblings.

And then there's a question as to whether this situation is likely to change, whether reconciliation is likely. And again, if the answer to that is yes, we would ask for a little bit more detail just surrounding that, just so we can determine whether estrangement is the right course here.

And then the final section for the third party is an opportunity to give us a little bit more background if they can. This will just help us towards making that decision on estrangement, but what we don't need here is any great personal or sensitive detail as to why the relationship has necessarily broken down, as long as it is enough to tell us that that is the case. Okay.

So if we got the evidence in the form of a letter, then again, this is an example of what we would expect to see. So here we have somebody that's a social worker with a local authority, known the student, for two years and is confirming that student is estranged from their parents. Also confirming that there's been a breakdown of the relationship, which began three years ago and that's after a disagreement over life choices. So where are we saying about, we don't how much detail we need, here, we're quite happy that that's broken down over life choices, we don't need to know the ins and outs of that, or any finer detail. That's quite sufficient for us. And again, it goes on to tell us that this situation is not likely to change. So that is a pretty perfect piece of evidence for us and we will be able to award independent status on that amount of information.

So when we award independent status, we have to decide whether it is going to be for that particular academic year, or whether it's going to be for the duration of studies. And if it's for the duration of studies, then the student would normally not be expected to have to provide further evidence down the line. The exception to that could be if there's perhaps an audit carried out, if it is just a sample check of an application that hits on that student, in which case, they may then be asked to provide further evidence down the line.

So for certain categories, we would always give the award for the duration of studies. And that is where both parents are deceased, whether they have evidence of support, or where they have evidence of care leaver status. And that's because we've received all that detail at the outcome of the studies. So we don't need to go and revisit that, but that isn't going to change.

When the parents can't be found, we would generally, sorry, parents can't be found or unable to be contacted, we would generally only award that for one year and that's simply because circumstances can change. If a parent has had medical condition, they could improve. And so we would normally revisit that year on year just to check what the situation is again. In extreme cases, perhaps we've had medical evidence in at the beginning that's detailed a parent's condition and it's quite clearly told us that there's never going to be an improvement and that the parent's never going to be in a position to be able to provide that information, then clearly, in those kinds of situations we would look at that, it would be perfectly fine to do it for duration. But generally, that's the year-on-year evidence.

For estrangements, where we get a nice solid robust piece of evidence, like that letter we've just looked at, we would then award it for a duration wouldn't ask for further evidence in future academic years. The situations where we would only award it for one academic year, or where estrangement is recent, or where there's been any indication that reconciliation may be likely, so that we would then go out the next year, just to check if there's been any change in the circumstances. And we would only award independent status for the one academic year where that has been awarded following a telephone review with one of the estrangement assessors.

And sponsoring parent deceased, I said that we would reward that for that particular academic year, and in future, we will be looking at what the situation is with the remaining parent.

For parents outside of the EU, again, that's where circumstances and situations can change. So again, we would be looking for an update on the situation each academic year and each application.

So when we've awarded status, we email the students to tell them and we also attach or send out a letter which just tells them whether it's been granted for that particular academic year, or for the duration of studies. Now, this letter is primarily just for the students' records, but what we do suggest is that they may want to take it to their university or college, just so that they are aware of the status, because this will then help with any applications for bursaries or any additional support available directly from the from the HEP.

So what we're going to do now is we're going to have a look at a couple of pieces of evidence for you to make a decision on how you would treat them and whether you would award independent status or not. So you'll have the opportunity to vote here to tell us, and the voting headings will be down where you can award independent status for one academic year, you would award it for the duration of studies, or whether you would reject this piece of evidence is insufficient.

So the first one is when we've had a piece of evidence from a sixth form college tutor who has known the student for some significant time since back in 2019. They're telling us that there's been no contact in the last 12 months and that situation isn't likely to change. They've gone on then to give us a little bit more background, telling us that the student has moved out of family home after an argument a few years ago with father and again, that was over life choices. They're no longer speaking.

There's obviously been attempts to get the relationship back on track but sadly, this hasn't worked and it isn't likely to in the future. So since 2019, the student has been estranged from both father and mother, still sees the siblings now and again, but no contact with parents. So we have a 30 second slot for you to poll your answer there. Yes, for one academic year, yes, for the duration of studies or no, you would not accept that piece of evidence.

Okay. So we'll just give a little bit of time for those to come through. Have we all managed to get the poll in okay? Yeah, great. A few more seconds before that closes. And then we should see the results come up fairly shortly. All right, and there we are. So a good proportion of you would award it for the duration of studies with a smaller awarding it, but just for the one academic year, and nobody thinking that that's not an acceptable piece of evidence.

Okay. So comparing it to what would happen if SFE dealt with that piece of evidence and in those circumstances, yes we would award it for the duration. So in agreement with most of you, and that's because we've clearly been told that there's been no contact in the last 12 months and we've clearly been told that that situation is unlikely to change.

So one more for you to look at here. And again, it's a completed estrangement form, this time by a student union adviser at the HEP. And assuming that students starts in September 22, the adviser becomes aware of the situation in November, confirms there has been no contact in the last 12 months, confirms that that isn't likely to change and then gives us some more information telling us that James, the student and his mother have had no contact for months now the relationship is completely broken down. Completely estranged from mother and then it's just telling us he can't be taken in by family members. So again, if you would like to poll for yes, you will reward status for one academic year, yes, you would award it for the duration of studies or no, you don't think that's sufficient evidence for us. Again, we'll just have to have a little wait for those votes to come through. And then again, we will compare it and see if it agrees with how we at SFE will do.

We're nearly there for the numbers to come through and we'll see the results shortly. Right, fabulous. Oh, so a bit more of a range here. Which half of you would give it for an academic year, 22 percent for the duration of studies, but 30 percent wouldn't accept it? Okay.

So if we look at what we would do at SLC and we would award it based totally on that evidence. This evidence is clearly mentioned, with a clearly breakdown there that there's absolutely no mention of the Father. It may be that the student has never known the father, that he hasn't been in the picture for many a year, but we don't know that. So we would award it on that evidence. So in these circumstances, we'd have to go back to say thank you for the evidence you've sent, can you tell us what to say with the dad. So one extra sentence in there would have made it acceptable to us. And that's quite common.

**Male 1**

Can I ask you a quick question, would you then go to this person who has completed the form for the assessor from the third party or would you go to the student to say, you haven't been awarded this loan?

**Lesley Carbro**

We would say we can't award you on that basis. Can you tell us what the situation is with dad?

**Male 1**

So you'll tell the student?

**Lesley**

Oh, yeah. Okay. So does that answer...?

**Male 1**

It's all right.

**Lesley**

Yeah fine, okay. So now we're going to have a quick look at the role of the estrangement assessor. And as I said, what we primarily do is look at independent estrangement cases where the student has been unable to provide evidence. Okay, and once the students have been assigned to this estrangement assessor, we continue with that, working with that students throughout their studies. So we basically deal with them from application to graduation, they stay with us. And that's because they tend to be some of our most vulnerable students so we like to give a bit of continuity and it means that they have a single point of contact throughout their studies if they have any queries or concerns further along the line. And it just makes their journey a little bit easier.

So as I say, we carry out telephone reviews with those students and it gives a couple of examples of why they may not be able to provide evidence but that's purely that they can't provide evidence, okay?

And students can be referred to us through the estrangement email address, I'll give you a little bit more detail of that, or by calling in our contact centre and telling us that they can't provide anything, or if they've written in, giving us some more detail and saying they can't provide evidence for us.

So, this is a bit of a busy slide but basically going through the process where they are assigned to an estrangement assessor. So once the referral comes in, we contact the student or set up a telephone interview with them, nice convenient place and time for them. During that conversation, we do try and get a little bit of background about circumstances and situation and we then maybe just drill down to see if there's actually anybody that could provide evidence for the student because it might be somebody that they're just never thought of.

When we're having that conversation, you know, it can prompt them to think of somebody. If that's the case, we ask them to send that evidence in and along with our telephone review, we can decide where to award independent status.

If they're unable to provide any further evidence, then a decision on status is based purely on that telephone review. Okay. And if we've awarded it, as I said earlier, it will just be for the one academic year. And again, we'll do the normal notifications, usually we keep in phone contact with these students, so we'll give them a ring, we'll email them, we'll send a letter confirming the situation for us.

And during that telephone review, we do talk to students about next steps and what will happen in the future with their applications. And we do explain that in the future, we would be looking for evidence from a third party, and we talk about who they can think about getting that setup so that when it comes to next year, there's somebody in place to provide evidence. And that's the point we normally refer them to the support services at the HEP. Suggest the linking with them, keep talking to them, so come next application they got somebody ideally placed to provide evidence.

And if all goes as it should do, it doesn't always, but if it goes as it should do, when they come to do in their next application, they can then provide evidence. And if that's satisfactory, we can award independent status for the duration at that stage. Although even if we awarded for duration, we will keep the students recorded with us, so we will still take responsibility for their future applications.

And this is a quick slide of the customer journey throughout the estrangement process and it's really just a mirror image of what we've just seen. The student comes to us, goes through a telephone review, we award independent status, we tell them to make the HEP aware of the situation so when it comes around to the next application, they get in touch with those when they're ready to do that, we talk them through the evidence requirements and we hopefully can award independent status for the duration at that point.

### **Female 1**

How does the application...

### **Male 2**

Can you use the microphone, sorry? Some people are online.

### **Female 1**

Just wondering how if the student, the second year then makes the application, how does get linked back into the caseworker so that the caseworker picks it up and knows that it's...

**Lesley Carbro**

It's always noted in the notes.

**Female 1**

All right.

**Lesley Carbro**

So anybody picking that up during the normal workflow would see it's been assigned to a caseworker. -And so it all comes directly to us.

**Female 1**

Great.

**Lesley Carbro**

So it may go into the general workflow, but it would be quite obvious that it's one of ours, we have lovely fancy starry notes. There can be no mistake that they're one of ours, and it will come to us.

**Female 1**

Oh great.

**Lesley Carbro**

Thanks Amy. Right, so finally I'm going to leave you with some details of how to contact the independent team. Now, if it is contact with the general independent team, they do have an inbox there and they do, that is really for queries that are a little bit out of the ordinary. So perhaps only cases that have become urgent, because you know, it's hitting the time review and payments are due but evidence hasn't been worked or that type of thing. And we also will accept in that inbox, declaration forms that haven't been signed, but have been completed by the HEP.

If you can complete the form and do as the usual wet signature, then we would expect that form to come in in the normal way and that is by email or more commonly nowadays by the student uploading it to their account. But if like me you're working remotely, for some or part of your time, you can't produce a signature, in those circumstances, we'll accept the evidence into that inbox, as long, and this isn't important as long as, as long as it comes from your HEP address, so that we can see who it's actually come from. Again, if an audit was carried out, we can see that it's come from the HEP.

And for the estrangement assessors, we have our own dedicated inbox with an address there and we're also a direct telephone line. This is manned Monday to Friday, nine till five and this is for new referrals coming into us, or for any queries about students that have already been assigned to us.

Now, I do warn you that that tone gets very, very busy, so if ever you do want to try and talk to us, you will get a busy message, then by all means, drop us an email and we'll ring you back. Okay, because, as I say, unfortunately, particularly in peak times, we can be inundated on that.

Okay, so that's enough of me talking now. So as I say, if any questions that, my clicker isn't working, oh, there we go. It's being impatient. If any questions have been submitted on the app, then they will be collated and brought to me. I'm not quite sure when, I suspect at the end of the seminar, but I will get back on to those as quickly as possible. But if we have any questions in the room, happy to take those now. Yeah, would you mind, sorry, I forgot about that earlier, to get a mic down just for the people so they can hear remotely.

### **Female 3**

If this student hasn't quite reached the three-year requirement for self-support before the start of their course in their first year, would they be able to apply for that status in their second or third year?

### **Lesley Carbro**

No, this is quite a common misconception. Somebody will apply for self support, we'll say sorry, you haven't worked for 36 months. They come back in year two, and I've worked for 36 months now. But unfortunately, it is quite clear that it's 36 months prior to the first academic year.

### **Female 3**

Thank you.

### **Lesley Carbro**

Okay. Anything else from anybody?

### **Female 4**

Just back on the topic of the estrangement and requiring there to be no contact with the parents for 12 months. I mean, often when the relationship breaks down or whatever, that's the stage that they immediately come and want the help but they can't.

### **Lesley Carbro**

They can actually. And that's my fault, I probably should have made that clear when I mentioned that the cases we deal with. So apologies for that. Yeah, obviously life happens. You know, there can be, a student can certainly go home for a visit at Christmas and get kicked out. Barred forevermore. Relationships do break down throughout the year. When that's the case, then they would be generally assigned to one of the estrangement assessors because it's usually very recent and still very raw at that stage.

But yeah, we do consider cases that have happened throughout the academic year and where there's been contact. And it can be, you know that just happened very, very recently, but if we can be satisfied, and again, there may be other people that can even evidence that for us, yeah, we do take into consideration. They have to be fairly extreme circumstances, I'll be perfectly honest with you, but yeah, we do look at them on an individual case by case basis. So sorry, I didn't make that clear early on.

And I think we may have a minute or two left. We'll open it up for any questions. And as I said, any questions that you've put through on the app that we can't get around to, then I will deal with as soon as I possibly can. But we have one from the room so.

**Female 5**

It was just to ask if this PowerPoint is available online afterwards because we couldn't hear it and we couldn't see it.

Couldn't hear it and couldn't see it? Oh I'm sorry, I do believe that it will be on the presentation site. I think that may be a week or two before it gets up there, but I do understand it will be available.

**Female 5**

Okay, thank you.

**Lesley Carbro**

If you want to catch me and give me your details, I'll see if we can possibly send you a copy in advance as well. But sorry about that.

**Female 6**

So I just have a quick question. When the example you gave with the estrangement form, do we have to explain like, as to the reason that may lead to the estrangement, because I know the example that you gave just kind of stated that they were estranged from X date. Do we also have to maybe, obviously not too much detail but it's kind of maybe events that led up to that. Is that helpful or is that not necessary?

**Lesley Carbro**

It can be helpful, but I suppose what I'm trying to say is, we don't want to be gathering evidence and information, particularly sensitive and personal information that we don't need to hold. You know, not only do we not want to hold it for the student's point of view, but then it leads to GDPR issues down the line and that type of thing.

So if you have, it is quite sufficient to say there were arguments with the parents about lifestyle issues or you can give us as much detail as you want, we just don't need it. We basically need the minimum to confirm that either of you, you know, that relationship has broken down. That's the bottom line of what we need to know. Does that make sense?

**Female 6**

Perfect, thank you.

**Lesley Carbro**

All right. Anybody else? No? Okay. Well, as I say, if you're all happy with that then, I will get around to the queries that you've submitted and get back to you as quickly as possible. And as I say, if the lady wants to give me her direct contact details, I will see if we can get a copy to you. But as I say, I'm sure it was mentioned that it will be put on the site, but I will find out for you. Okay.

**Female 5**

Thank you so much.

**Lesley Carbro**

All right, well thanks very much for your time then.



**For more information:**

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