Exploring the Experiences of Estranged Students in UK Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Some students in higher education study without family support, known as 'estranged students'. Rarely mentioned in the widening participation discourse, existing research into this group is predominantly quantitative. This dissertation applies a Bourdieusian framework to explore incompatibilities between estranged students' habitus and the field of the university. It explores barriers faced by estranged students at university, the support mechanisms accessed, and their recommendations of how to improve support. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with six estranged students studying at universities in England, exploring their experiences of issues regarding finances, accommodation, and mental health. Participants reported a range of intersectional barriers and experienced a reliance on additional support mechanisms to supplant the capital usually provided by family. These findings illustrate the complexities of estranged students' experiences and strengthen evidence that to foster a sense of belonging, holistic support mechanisms must be implemented and made accessible to estranged students.

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CHAPTER 1 _____

INTRODUCTION

Research context

Education policy in the UK has recently committed to expanding the higher education (HE) sector to accommodate more students. Whilst encouraging an overall expansion, accepting 1.7 million undergraduates into universities and colleges in the 2015/16 academic year (Universities UK, 2018), the government also emphasises the need for a widening participation (WP) initiative, so that 'all those with the potential to benefit from higher education have an equal opportunity to participate and succeed' (Department of Business, Innovation and Skills [BIS], 2014, p. 7). The new HE regulator, the

Office for Students (OfS), replaces the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) in giving HE providers guidance on how to 'make higher education more representative of wider society and reduce the attainment gaps between underrepresented groups and other groups' (OfS, 2018b). Universities have to submit 'access agreements' to charge the highest tuition fees, documents which identify what they will do to admit and support students of 'non-traditional' class, gender, or ethnic backgrounds (OFFA, 2018a).

A group of students less frequently recognised in this WP discourse, though slowly gaining a voice, are estranged students. These students are defined as having 'no communicative relationship with either of their living biological parents' (OFFA, 2018b), and are studying at university without a family support network. In the 2013/14 academic year, 9,338 students were recognised by the Student Loan Company (SLC) as 'estranged from parents' (Stand Alone and UNITE, 2015). In the UK, family support is considered 'complementary' to HE students (Antonucci, 2016; Brooks, 2016), meaning that estranged students may lack financial, social, and cultural capital compared to their peers whilst studying (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

In recent years, UK charity Stand Alone has worked to increase awareness of family estrangement, support those who are estranged, conduct research into family estrangement, and encourage universities to improve

support for estranged students (Stand Alone, 2018a). The charity launched the Stand Alone Pledge in 2016, which universities and colleges can sign to publicly commit to supporting estranged students in four areas where they may face barriers: finance, accommodation, mental health, and outreach (Stand Alone, 2018b).   As of April 2018, 59 institutions outline their support mechanisms for estranged students in their access agreements, and 42 institutions have signed the Pledge.

Research objectives

This research aims to use an interpretive constructivist paradigm to explore how estranged students experience HE. While the research prioritises highlighting commonalities in estranged students' experiences, it aims to focus on the subjective thoughts and feelings of individual students. To do this, the following research questions were designed:

1. What challenges do estranged students face in HE?

2. What support networks are available for estranged students in HE?

3. How do estranged students think universities can improve their support?

Semi-structured interviews, using either 'voice' or 'text' methods, were conducted with estranged students to help answer these questions.   Six students in total were interviewed, all studying in their first or second year at universities across England.

Rationale

This research aims to address the gaps in existing research. While research into the experiences of 'non-traditional' student groups within HE is growing, the experiences of estranged students have not been comprehensively explored. So far, most research concerning estranged students has been conducted by Stand Alone, and is quantitative in nature. As such, this dissertation will add the qualitative voices of estranged students into these research contexts.

It is important to acknowledge my personal interest in, and rationale for choosing, the topic of estranged students in HE for this dissertation. As an estranged student in HE, my own experiences and difficulties in navigating some aspects of university made me aware of Stand Alone and their work, and I have been involved in promoting their campaigns and research for over a year.   As such, this dissertation topic was chosen to encourage positive improvement within the HE sector, allowing estranged students to attend

university in the future without being negatively impacted by their family circumstances. However, this research is not autobiographical; though I made it clear to participants that I share aspects of experience with them, this dissertation is about *their* experiences of university. I do not intend to separate myself entirely from the research, but to use my 'insider' experience within this group to enhance understanding and awareness of the experiences of those who are estranged from their families during their university studies.

Structure

This dissertation is divided into seven chapters. Chapter 2 will explore the surrounding literature in the relevant research fields of HE and the experiences of 'non-traditional' students, families and family estrangement, and estranged students in HE. Chapter 3 will critically discuss the research methodology, and introduce the six students who were interviewed. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 will address the research questions by discussing the results of the interviews in relation to the themes of finance, accommodation, and mental health. Chapter 7 will summarise the primary findings, consider limitations, and provide recommendations for how estranged students can be supported in HE.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I will discuss existing literature relevant to the topic of estranged students in higher education. It will be split into distinct sections based on the different research fields that this dissertation draws upon: widening participation in higher education, the experiences of 'non-traditional' student groups, research into families in society and family estrangement, and the small field of research into estranged students in higher education. It aims to highlight how this research is informed by a range of disciplines and explore the context of estranged students' experiences in university. The chapter will conclude with the initial codes generated from this literature review, which will be developed and used to explore the research areas.

Widening participation in higher education

In the UK, HE policy pushes a widening participation (WP) agenda, which aims to reduce social inequalities by 'removing the barriers to higher education' (OFFA, 2018a) that students from 'non-traditional' social class, ethnic, and gender backgrounds may face.   Historically, WP policy has focused on widening access to HE: the 1944 Education Act introduced maintenance grants to help students afford living costs, the Robbins Report (1963) led to the creation of new universities and an increase in HE participation, and the 2003 White Paper recommended that universities work to 'raise aspirations' of HE for potential students (Boliver, 2018; DfES, 2003). More recently, WP policies have expanded to consider the 'student lifecycle', meaning that anyone should have 'an equal opportunity to participate and succeed, on a course and in an institution that best fit their potential' (BIS, 2014, p. 7).

While this discourse appears positive for reducing social inequalities through education, some scholars argue that some of the language used is problematic.   There are concerns that positioning some students as 'non-traditional' can encourage a view that these students are deficient and unable to assimilate into HE (Field & Morgan-Klein, 2010; Thomas, 2006). The labelling of some students as 'disadvantaged' can push the blame for social

inequalities away from society and its institutions, towards individuals who are not thought to be working hard enough (Smit, 2012).

Research on the experiences of students who classify as 'non-traditional' in HE has been conducted (e.g. Meuleman, Garrett, Wrench, & King, 2014; Taylor & Scurry, 2011), which often uses a Bourdieusian theoretical framework (Bourdieu, 1986; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). This argues that 'non-traditional' students may have a 'habitus', a set of codes and behaviours which are influenced and restricted by the economic, cultural, and social capital transmitted from their family backgrounds, which differs to the habitus of students who traditionally attend HE. As a result, 'non-traditional' students may find that their habitus is incompatible with the 'field' of HE institutions, meaning they either have to negotiate their identity to 'fit in', or exclude themselves (Bathmaker et al., 2016; Reay, Crozier, & Clayton, 2010).

Existing research into the experiences of 'non-traditional' groups may be some of the closest reflections we have of how estranged students experience HE. Much of this research considers the role of a student's family in providing them with a habitus that is incompatible with what is expected from HE institutions. For example, students who lack the economic capital to afford the costs associated with university may have to work alongside their studies; Antonucci (2016) argues that the student population is 'polarised' between

students who do not need to work and can take advantage of the HE experience, and students who need to work and negotiate their identity between 'student' and 'worker'. Moreover, research has been conducted into the experiences of care leavers, students who have been in local authority care during their childhood and have no stable family background; this research identifies that care leavers may experience financial difficulties and loneliness if they lack a stable family background (Jackson, Ajayi, & Quigley, 2005). Care leavers may perceive that they do not 'belong' in HE because their family background is so dissimilar to the backgrounds of the other students in the HE field (Bluff, King, & Mcmahon, 2012; Thomas, 2012). As a result, care leavers studying in the UK are 38% more likely to withdraw from their courses than other students (Harrison, 2017).

Families and family estrangement

Families in society

To consider 'family estrangement', it is important to acknowledge the privileged position of the 'family' within contemporary British society and the implications that this has on those who do not fit into these norms. 'Family' is defined as a group of people who have biological or legal relations to one another, whose

membership within this group transcends death or levels of contact (Agllias, 2017a). Western culture has a deep connection with the idea that 'blood is thicker than water' (Scharp & Thomas, 2016, p. 32), which claims that biological familial bonds are stronger and more important than those of friendship. Historically, the family is viewed to be 'naturally given' (Barrett & McIntosh, 1982), a 'non-voluntary' group that all individuals are a part of (Hess, 2000; Scharp, 2017). The family is viewed as 'a source of identity, reassurance and safety' for individuals (Steel, Kidd, & Brown, 2012, p. 8). The family is assumed to be located within the private, endurable space of the 'home' (McKie, 2005; Smart, 2007).   In sociological literature, the 'home' is conceptualised as being different to the 'house', in that the 'home' has symbolic significance as a place demonstrative of family identity and/or stability (Mallett, 2004; Morgan, 1996).

Some scholars have called the 'family' into question, arguing that it is a taken-for-granted concept that is constructed and reproduced in the actions of members of society and its institutions. Though not a family scholar himself, Bourdieu (2005) argues that the 'family' exists as a private separate universe with its own 'family discourse', a separate language it uses about itself which is based upon normative ways of conducting relationships. The 'family discourse'

impacts 'ordinary discourse', the language that society as a whole uses, influencing the ways that other institutions in society are governed. As a result,

> the family in its legitimate definition is a privilege instituted into a universal norm: a de facto privilege that implies a symbolic privilege - the privilege of being *comme il faut*, conforming to the norm, and therefore enjoying a symbolic profit of normality.
>
> (Bourdieu, 2005, pp. 22-23)

Individuals who sit in normative family structures have certain privileges that those without families may lack:

> This privilege is, in reality, one of the major conditions of the accumulation and transmission of economic, cultural and symbolic privileges. The family plays a decisive role in the maintenance of the social order.   (Bourdieu, 2005, p. 23)

The absence of a family network can place individuals in a position that is outside of this 'social order'. Indeed, Donzelot (1977/1997) argued that, in the '*ancien regime*', those who did not belong to a family disturbed the order of society, and were dependent on the charity of philanthropists or the state. While the ancient governments relied on families to maintain societal order, Giddens (1999) argues that contemporary government also relies on and calls

for the dominance of the family as an institution. Though implicit, this appears to transfer into the HE sector, as the economic capital that students can access from the state through loans is means-tested, i.e. dependent on the economic capital of the family (SLC, 2018), and on the assumption that families can provide additional financial support throughout their studies (Brooks, 2016).

However, the 'family discourse' of biological ties to others is beginning to be reproduced and adapted by some groups to mean something more of an emotional kinship. For example, Weeks, Donovan, and Heaphy (1999) note that the term 'family' is used by LGBT+ communities to embrace relationships which are 'as real as [those with] the family of origin' (p. 89). Silva and Smart (1999) argue that viewing 'friends' as 'family' is not illogical, but 'a reflection of how the subjective meaning of family is changing'. However, outside these groups, the term continues to be loaded with associations of biology or legality, and a universal change in who is considered as 'family' has not yet been achieved. Until the 'family discourse' shifts enough to influence 'ordinary discourse', the HE sector will continue to privilege students who fit within traditional family structures.

Family estrangement

The way that contemporary discourse conceptualises the family as a unit of purely biological relations results in the existence of 'family estrangement'. The definition of family estrangement has been debated in previous research, and as a result the term lacks a standardised definition (Blake, 2017). Some view estrangement as a 'cutoff' (Bowen, 1982; Conti, 2015) and explicit 'choice' initiated by a family member to discontinue a relationship (Agllias, 2017b; Carr, Holman, Abetz, Koenig Kellas, & Vagoni, 2015), while others view it as a 'communicative process' which family members have to work to maintain (Scharp, Thomas, & Paxman, 2015).

Warshak (2010) argues that estrangement is simply a physical separation from a family member. Agllias (2017b) identifies that an estrangement relationship may be primarily physical, where there is little or no contact between members of the family, or primarily emotional, where there is limited, uncomfortable, or strained contact between family members. However, an individual's experience of estrangement, with one family member or with multiple, can be too complex to define as simply as this, and so Scharp (2017) argues that conceptualising estrangement too narrowly may reflect a researcher's binary views.

The process of family estrangement can be initiated for a number of reasons. Carr et al. (2015) outline three main categories reported by adults in the US for their estrangement:

- Intrapersonal (due to the characteristics of an individual);

- Intrafamilial (due to conflicts between members of a family); and

- Interfamilial (due to factors beyond the family's control).

Intrapersonal reasons can include mental illness or narcissism; intrafamilial factors may be abuse, conflict rivalry, or toxicity; and interfamilial causes involve geographical or physical separation of family members (Scharp, 2014, pp. 14-15). These conflicts may occur between two people, but spill over into other relationships within and outside of the family (Clingempeel & Brand-Clingempeel, 2004).

Combinations of these factors over long periods of time may trigger the estrangement process, which can be long-term, traumatic, and distressing for individuals involved (Dattilio & Nichols, 2011). Those who are experiencing estrangement may be exposed to 'triggers' which create further emotional pain, such as Christmas, birthdays, or anniversaries (Agllias, 2017a). They also have to negotiate a new identity which is separate to the one established within the family (Scharp & McLaren, 2017), committing to developing a

'differentiated self' which stands apart from a past self and from familial norms (Agllias, 2017a, p. 76). However, it is important to acknowledge that family estrangement is not always a negative experience; for some, it is necessary to increase their wellbeing (Scharp, 2014).

It is generally assumed that estrangement is a rare occurrence, but a recent survey by Ipsos MORI (2014) found that 8% of the UK's general population were physically estranged from at least one family member. The survey also found, however, that 84% of respondents were not aware of others they knew, including friends and family, experiencing estrangement, and Agllias (2017a) argues that this highlights the findings that family estrangement is an isolating experience for many. Indeed, Scharp (2016) discusses the impact of stigmas associated with family estrangement, noting that individuals would actively avoid disclosing their circumstances to peers for fear of negative evaluation. Feelings of stigma are not necessarily surprising, considering that the discourse of estrangement in media often focuses on reconciliation rather than acceptance of estrangement (e.g. Davis, 2002; Richards, 2008). Stigma around family estrangement was experienced by 68% of the participants in a study conducted by Stand Alone and Blake (2015), as individuals felt judged for contradicting family norms and because of a lack of understanding around estrangement. Though Scharp and Thomas (2016) argue that family

estrangement provides an opportunity to redefine normative views of 'family' (p. 32), it can be difficult for individuals to do this alone.

Estranged students in higher education

Estranged students are defined in the HE sector as students who are under the age of 25 and who have 'no communicative relationship with either of their living biological parents' (OFFA, 2018b).   This definition is designed to fit students within the existing student finance system as 'independent'; these are students who do not need to provide evidence of their parents' income when applying for financial support, such as those who are parents themselves, married, or over the age of 25 (Student Finance England [SFE], 2016). In order to be classified as such, students need to provide 'evidence' of their 'permanent' (usually at least 12 months) lack of contact with their parents in the form of 'confirmation from a professional person' (SFE, 2016, p. 4). As a result, estranged students are constructed in very financial terms, needing to 'prove' that their lack of contact means they are unable to access financial capital from their families. The strict definitions provided by the state ignore complexities in the estrangement process, such as 'cyclical estrangement' where relationships may fluctuate between estrangement and reconciliation for

a variety of reasons (Agllias, 2017a, p. 7). If the application seems impossible, estranged students may feel pressured to reconcile contact with their parents in order to have the capital to study (National Union of Students [NUS], 2010).

Research on estranged students is restricted to that conducted by Stand Alone (Stand Alone, 2015; Stand Alone & Blake, 2015; Stand Alone and UNITE, 2015) which looks at the experiences of estranged students from a quantitative perspective. The most recent statistic for the number of estranged students in HE is from the 2013/14 academic year, where 9,338 students were officially recognised by SLC as 'estranged from parents' (Stand Alone and UNITE, 2015). As HE continues to expand, and as estranged students become more recognisable to universities, it is possible that this figure is currently higher. Moreover, this figure is limited in itself, as it does not recognise those who do not apply for the full loan package, nor those whose applications for student finance fail.

Similarly to care leavers, estranged students have experienced unstable family circumstances, but are often not recognised by local authorities and put into the care system (Stand Alone and UNITE, 2015). Instead, estranged students leave the family home and minimise contact with their families, most often between the ages of 16 and 19. Students report a range of intrapersonal and intrafamilial reasons for their estrangement, such as abuse (particularly

emotional abuse), clashing expectations and values, and rejection of LGBT+ students.

Without financial capital and support from their families, estranged students can be more reliant on the SLC student finance packages to pay for their tuition fees and living costs. 61% of estranged students found the process of applying for loans and trying to 'prove' their estrangement difficult (Stand Alone, 2015).   Moreover, 53% of estranged students believe that SLC's financial packages are inadequate to live off, because they are designed to support low-income students during term-time only, and thus estranged students are more likely to resort to using payday loans or credit cards and accumulating further debt than the average student (Stand Alone and UNITE, 2015).

Estranged students may also face barriers accessing and staying in accommodation whilst in HE. Some university-owned accommodation is only available during term-time, and as estranged students do not have a family home to return to they are at risk of becoming homeless during vacation periods. Stand Alone (2015) found that 33% of estranged students either registered as homeless or considered registering prior to starting their course, and 14% were at risk of homelessness during the long summer vacation. Furthermore, students often need to provide significant deposits and/or a

guarantor when moving into accommodation, both of which can be difficult to access without the family's financial capital. As a result, estranged students are more likely to live further away from campus in privately-rented accommodation (Stand Alone and UNITE, 2015).

Social capital and emotional support networks are also limited for estranged students, so they may be at risk of experiencing issues with mental health whilst at university. Most of the research discusses mental health issues which stem from difficulties in accessing financial support and accommodation, but estranged students may also struggle because of having no formal support network.   In a recent radio broadcast (BBC Woman's Hour, 2017), an estranged student named Roxanna discussed emotional issues she had faced at university; for example, during the Christmas vacation she was alone in her accommodation, and on Christmas Day 'I didn't even hear footsteps. I was just in my flat in tears all day'. Similarly to care leavers, estranged students may feel that their background is dissimilar to those of other students, and thus experience isolation whilst in HE (Harrison, 2017).

These barriers to accessing and succeeding in higher education can threaten the retention of estranged students and increase their chances of dropping out of university (Tinto, 1993). Indeed, Stand Alone (2015) found that 41% of estranged students had considered suspending or withdrawing from

their studies, which 14% of students did. To support estranged students

through any barriers they experience, and to pick up some of the shortfalls

from external bodies, universities are encouraged to create tailored support for

estranged students and outline these mechanisms in access agreements (OfS,

2018a). In the 2018/19 access agreements, 59 universities describe their

support for estranged students, compared to only 15 universities in 2016/17,

suggesting that there is more awareness of estranged students' needs in HE

(OFFA, 2018b).   Another method of recognising universities who have

developed positive support systems is through the Stand Alone Pledge (Stand

Alone, 2018b). University senior management teams can opt-in to the Pledge

by writing a letter of commitment to Stand Alone, outlining a two-year plan of

how they will create and improve support mechanisms for estranged students

within the four areas of finance, accommodation, mental health, and outreach.

A list of the 42 universities and colleges who have signed the Pledge in April

2018, and reference for the up-to-date list of Pledged institutions, are in

Appendix A.

The Pledge letters outline a range of support mechanisms that

universities offer to estranged students. To support students facing financial

barriers, universities can offer bursaries for estranged students, access to

hardship funds, help applying for independent status with SLC, and careers

support. In accommodation, universities may provide 365-day accommodation, guarantor services, deferrals in payments, and kitchen/bedding packs.   For mental health, students can be offered a designated staff member who is their point of contact, peer support groups/mentoring, counselling services, and activities during vacations.   Finally, in outreach, universities may raise awareness of their support through staff training, community outreach with schools and charities, and dedicated webpages. Fig. 2.1 on the following page identifies how many Pledged universities identify certain types of support within their Pledge letters.

In rationalising their decision to sign the Pledge, many institutions refer to their WP record, using language which echoes government discourse by saying that they are 'committed to attracting, admitting, supporting and encouraging students with the most potential to succeed, regardless of their background or situation' (University of Plymouth, 2018). Others may reference it in relation to their own traditions of 'operating as an inclusive and friendly organisation' (University of Derby, 2017) rather than relating specifically to the WP agenda.   If rationalising from the perspective of helping students, the discourse varies. A minority offer an almost stigmatising position of students as victims of negative family circumstances and aim to 'help those students estranged from their families overcome the terrible difficulties they face in

What support do institutions pledge to offer to estranged students in their Stand Alone Pledge letters?
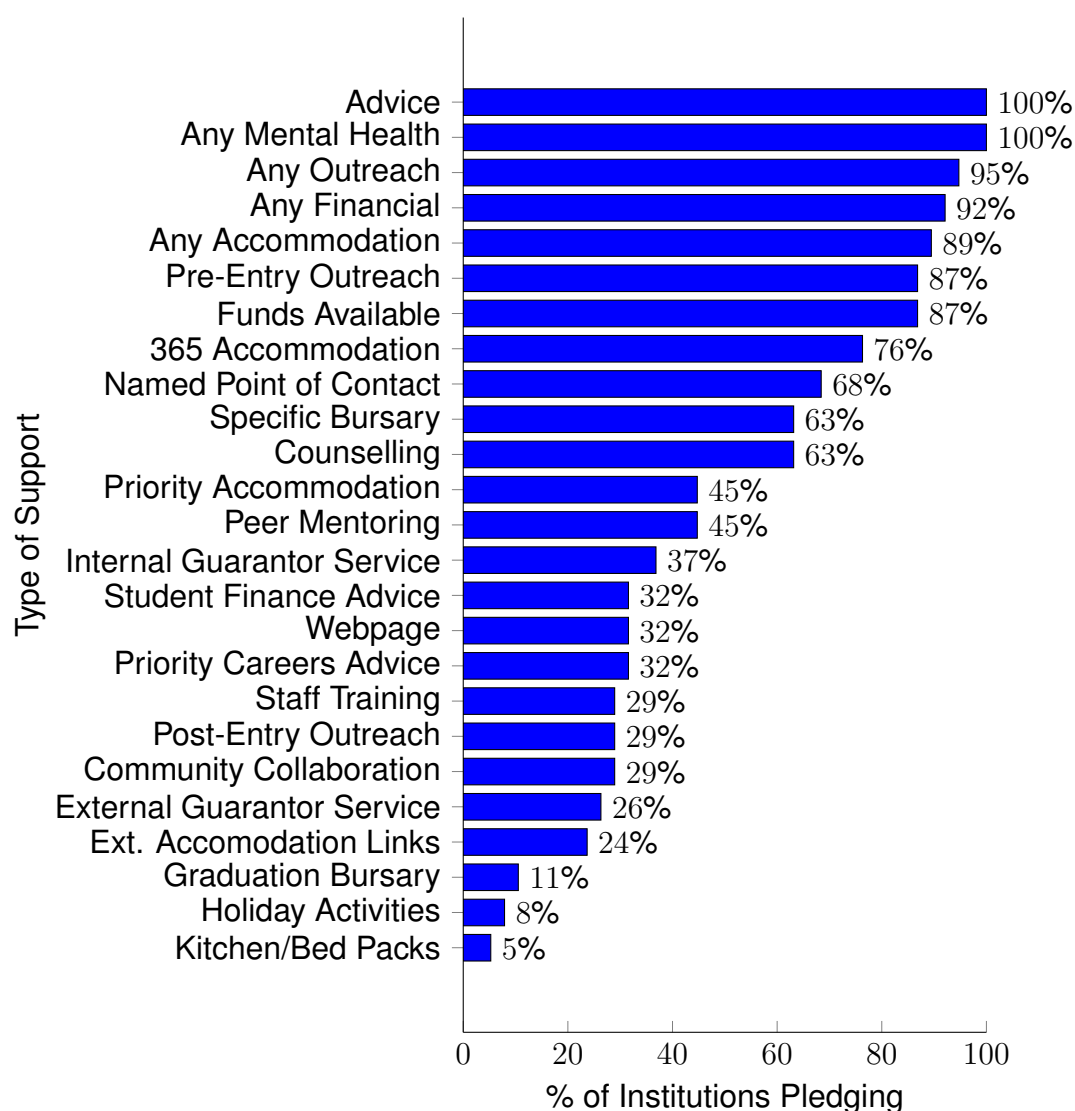
Note: there is no guarantee that these figures accurately depict the support that is offered by institutions. The Pledge letters describe institutions' intentions of support, meaning they may not yet be implemented, and they may not mention all the specific support that they offer. This chart represents only what was directly mentioned in Pledge letters.

Figure 2.1: Percentage of institutions who pledge to offer support mechanisms

realising their true potential' (Leeds Beckett University, n.d.). Others explicitly promote their aims to 'break down the stigma associated with disclosing difficult family circumstances to staff and support professionals' (Manchester Metropolitan University, 2016).

Whatever their rationale, universities are encouraged by Stand Alone to create holistic support mechanisms and ensure that their students are 'at the heart' of the design and implementation process (Bland, 2018). Universities may begin to support estranged students by expanding access to their existing support for care leavers, due to similar barriers for these groups (Western, 2018). Some institutions explicitly note how they work with students on an 'individual level' to ensure that support is 'appropriate, proportionate, and right for them' (Keele University, 2016) and acknowledge that estranged students are 'an individual, with different and often complex needs, expectations and aspirations' (Liverpool John Moores University, 2016) in their Pledge letters. Others position estranged students as valued members of their university community, with the aim of 'ensuring that those without a family network become an integral and valued part of ours' (Goldsmiths, 2016). Though the language of these documents, signed by senior management, does not necessarily reflect the practice conducted by staff members in charge of delivering this support, it may set a precedent of how estranged students are

perceived within their institution, working to contribute to or deviate from 'ordinary discourse' which stigmatises those who do not fit within traditional family structures (Bourdieu, 2005).

This literature review has established the context to this dissertation's research into the experiences of estranged students. It has identified the WP context to HE and the research into 'non-traditional' students within this context. Additionally, it has considered the family as a privileged social institution, and implications of this for those who choose estrangement. Finally, it has looked at existing research into the experiences of estranged students within HE, considering barriers students face, the support mechanisms that universities offer, and how institutions position estranged students within their Pledge letters. From these findings, the following themes were established:

- **Finance**: perceptions of financial situation, accessing financial support, part-time work;

- **Accommodation**: perceptions of housing situation, accessing accommodation, feelings towards the 'home';

- **Mental health**: perceptions of mental health, accessing mental health support, relationships to peers; and

- **Improving support** at HE institutions.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

This research draws from an interpretive constructivist paradigm to capture the thoughts and feelings that estranged students experience during their studies. It focuses primarily on non-academic aspects of HE, in areas such as finance, accommodation, and mental health. To achieve this, the study applied a semi-structured interview method, engaging with six estranged students at universities in England, using either voice (n=3) or text (n=3) methods. This chapter will discuss the qualitative design of the research, the interview method, thematic analysis, and ethical considerations. It will finish by introducing the contexts of each student who participated in this research, whose experiences will be examined in the discussion chapters.

Qualitative research

This research was framed from an interpretive constructivist paradigm. Interpretive research rejects the idea that all individuals in a group have homogeneous experiences, and argues that individuals are 'tied to particular social, historical and cultural contexts' (Ma, 2016, p. 26). Taking a constructivist position meant that I was primarily concerned with the subjectivity of students' experiences, and as such the methods are designed so that estranged students are positioned as active beings, not passive subjects, within the research (Ma, 2016).

The experiences of estranged students are rarely explored in research, and almost never explored through a qualitative lens. The exploratory design of this study was selected to provide insights into the lives of these students (Miller, 1986), with interviews designed to be flexible and allow for discussion of the things that estranged students viewed as the most important parts of their experiences. The initial themes of the interviews were derived from the literature review, but the students could talk about whatever they wanted to. The research does not attempt to generalise *the experience* of all estranged students studying in UK universities, but to instead explore the varieties and complexities of individual experience.

Sampling

The participants in this research are a self-selecting sample of UK/EU-domiciled undergraduate students studying at any university in England or Wales while estranged from their families. Due to the cultural sensitivity of family estrangement, and the difficulties in finding estranged students, self-selection was the natural method of sampling. Geographical restrictions were made to account for the devolved nature of education in the UK. Students at Scottish or Northern Irish universities are subject to different tuition fee levels and maintenance loans than students at universities in England and Wales. The inclusion of EU-domiciled students was made during the research process to allow for more students to participate; they are also subject to the same fee levels as UK-domiciled students and can apply for tuition fee loans, so their experiences are comparable.

Following the methodological decision of previous studies about family estrangement (Scharp, 2016; Scharp & McLaren, 2017), I did not use the term 'estranged' in any correspondence with participants. Instead, the term was replaced by the phrase 'without family support' due to concerns that the term may be potentially stigmatising or unfamiliar to some students. As a result, this study is does not have a restrictive definition of 'estranged student' like HE

funding bodies do. The term 'estranged' *was* used in recruitment emails to university staff to ensure that the email was sent to appropriate students, especially since many of these staff members also work with care leavers, who were not included in the study.

The primary method of recruitment was through email and social media. I did not have the personal email addresses for any estranged students, so I created a poster outlining the purpose of the research, what participation would entail, and my contact details, which I sent to institutions and asked them to forward it onto any estranged students they work with (see Appendix B). Emails were sent to the 'dedicated contact' for estranged students at 75 universities, whose emails were obtained from the Stand Alone website (see Stand Alone, 2018d). Similarly, emails were sent to a relevant sabbatical officer (either President or Welfare) at 38 students' unions, which I selected from the list of Pledged universities and others in the North of England. Templates for these emails are available in Appendix B. Additionally, the poster was shared on personal social media platforms and in Stand Alone networks, both online and in person at their conference on March 6th 2018.

There were some issues in recruitment. Initially, the study intended to interview 12-15 estranged students, but only six students completed the interview process. Although over a hundred emails were sent to universities

and students' unions, I received only 27 replies, some of which simply explained that they were unable to distribute the poster. Contextual factors may have played a part in this low response rate, as the timing coincided with the UCU strikes and the re-election of sabbatical officers. Moreover, a number of students who were interested in the study were unable to find a suitable time for the interview, and thus withdrew. This highlights some difficulties in finding the most suitable time to interview students; I did not want to recruit too early in the academic year while students, especially first years, were still settling into university life, but this meant that the interview process was delayed by periods when there were assignment deadlines or exams.

Furthermore, since the primary method of recruitment was through the institutions, only students who had disclosed their estrangement to the university could be contacted. It is also possible that the results of this study were affected by the use of a self-selecting sample. The sample may have been biased towards those who are more comfortable with their estrangement status or those who have had more positive experiences of HE; students with particularly negative experiences may have chosen not to participate to avoid discussing sensitive issues.

Interview method

Semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) were used when asking students about their university experiences. Interviews are used to 'unfold [the] meaning of peoples' experiences' (Kvale, 1996, p. 1), and aimed to allow students to, using their 'own words', express their thoughts, feelings, and views regarding their experiences of HE (Conti, 2015).   The flexibility of the semi-structured design allowed students to focus on the aspects of their experience that were most important to them (Robson, 2002).

Due to the geographical spread of students and the costs associated with travelling to students, a range of interview methods were offered for students to choose, based on their comfort levels and availability. Face-to-face interviews were offered to students based in the North of England, but students eligible for this method chose not to use it. Alternative methods used in this research were telephone call (n=2), Skype call (n=1), and email communications (n=3). For the ease of discussion, I will refer to these as 'voice' (telephone, skype) and 'text' (email) methods.

There is sparse literature about semi-structured qualitative interviews conducted over voice or text. There are claims that these alternative methods are not 'the gold standard' in qualitative research (Novick, 2008) because the

interviewer is unable to see body language or provide visual cues in the interviews. However, studies comparing face-to-face interviews with telephone interviews found very little difference in the depth of participants' responses (e.g. Sykes & Hoinville, 1985) as they are both synchronous methods of communication (Miller, 1995). Though text-based methods are asynchronous, they offer the opportunity of participation for those who prefer to express themselves in writing (Meho, 2006).

The interview structure varied slightly depending on whether it was conducted via voice or text (see Appendix C). In any case, the themes discussed were the same and developed based on the literature review. The first part of the interview aimed to build up some background for the student, and consisted of simple demographic questions about their age and their studies (university, course, year). Students were also asked to describe their lack of family contact (who they are not in contact with and how long that has been the case for), making it clear they did not have to go into details.

The second part of the interview aimed to ask students about how their estrangement had impacted their university experiences so far, both positively or negatively. The questions were framed from the areas of finance, accommodation, and mental health, as identified in the literature review. Voice interviews asked follow-up questions on these areas based on what students

said, whereas text interviews had a list of pre-ordered questions for students to consider when writing their responses.

The third and final part of the interview focused on asking students about the support they had received during their studies to help them deal with any issues they had faced. The pre-designed questions were the same for voice and text interviews, but voice interviews sometimes combined parts two and three depending on participant responses. I asked whether students knew about the support their university offered, what support they had accessed if any, and how they found that support. I also asked students whether they had accessed alternative support such as friends, student-led groups, or external charities. All interviews ended with the following question: 'What would you recommend that universities do to better support students without family support like yourself?'

Voice interviews

The beginning of the voice interviews were important to establish rapport and trust between me and the student, so I followed the guidance of (Johnson & Rowlands, 2012) to start with small talk, explain the purpose of the research, provide the opportunity to ask questions, and start with simple demographic questions. As the interviews moved into the semi-structured part, I worked to foster a positive environment, where participants could speak openly and freely

about their experiences, by actively listening to them (Lillrank, 2012; Wang & Yan, 2012). In the absence of visual cues, I ensured I was providing verbal cues (such as 'mmhm' and 'yes') throughout, and tried to frame follow-up questions using their own words (i.e. 'You said X, can you tell me a bit more about that?'). All voice interviews were, with participant consent, audio-recorded, and notes were taken throughout the interview.

Text interviews

In text interviews, all questions were sent to the student at once, with follow-up questions asked in separate emails, making its structure more like a questionnaire than a synchronous communication. Participants would take some time to respond, and follow-up communications were restricted due to time constraints (Meho, 2006). However, the use of text methods proved to be valuable for students; some found it difficult to schedule a time to arrange a call, and one participant noted they would have felt uncomfortable discussing their experiences via voice. As a result, the use of a text method allowed students to have more control over the interview situation as they were able to answer questions at their own convenience.

The main concern surrounding text interviews is how to maintain data quality and ensure in-depth responses to questions (Curasi, 2001). The nature

of the data collected through both methods are different: follow-up questions cannot be directly asked to participants, and text methods allowed more time for students to think about and edit their responses. However, I found that most responses from those who chose text-based interviews were in as much detail as those who chose a voice-based method.

Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. This involves looking at data from the transcripts and assigning categories or codes to the data to allow experiences to be compared (Boyatzis, 1998). Interviews conducted through voice were transcribed shortly after they took place, and text interviews were restructured so that students' answers aligned with the questions. Following analysis methods associated with exploratory research, I conducted 'holistic coding' whilst transcribing (Saldana, 2009), where I assigned general categories of finance, accommodation, or mental health to the students' quotations to capture the overall contents and themes. I also drew on techniques associated with grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 2004) to inductively generate codes from other comments within the dataset. After transcription, I re-familiarised myself with the transcripts to find

further themes within the students' words, which were adapted over time (Matthews & Ross, 2010). These were:

- **Finance**: perceptions of financial situation, accessing financial support, implications of part-time work

- **Accommodation**:   perceptions of housing situation, accessing accommodation, feelings towards the 'home'

- **Mental Health**: perceptions of mental health, accessing support, the role of peers

Ethics

Ethical approval was sought and given by Durham University School of Education Ethics Committee, and an amendment to the sample was approved during the research process (see Appendix D). When a potential participant emailed with their interest, I responded with more information about the study, and asked them for their preferred method and availability for interview (template in Appendix B). This email included the Participant Information Sheet and consent form (see Appendix D), which I asked students to read through and sign before the interviews could take place. As this was done online,

students had to type their name/date into the form, and take a photo of their written signature.

The students' involvement was entirely voluntary and confidential, and they were made aware of their right to withdraw without negative consequences. The participants' names, and any identifiers of their institution, have been removed to ensure their anonymity.   Throughout the research process, all data was stored confidentially on a password-protected computer. Participants were given many opportunities to ask questions about the research and what their participation would entail at all stages of the research.

Sensitivity in the research

As discussed in Chapter 2, the nature of family estrangement means that participants may become vulnerable when discussing their experiences, and may experience grief, shame, or stigma (Agllias, 2017a; Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007). To minimise this, I worked to ensure that my topics for discussion did not further stigmatise estranged students throughout the research process (Liamputtong, 2007). Sturges and Hanrahan (2004) argue that the anonymity in non-face-to-face interviews can help participants feel comfortable discussing sensitive issues, meaning the methods may have

helped to create an environment suitable for students to discuss sensitive experiences.

Throughout the interview process, I worked to ensure that a rapport was created between myself and the student to reduce power inequalities that can be created in research situations (Langellier, 1994). Students were given the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym if they wished, and were asked if they wanted a copy of the completed dissertation, which most responded positively to.

Insider research

As described in Chapter 1, my position as an estranged student has been a major rationale for this research. It is important to acknowledge my status as an 'insider' and the implications this may have had on the research. There are arguably a range of benefits for 'insider research', including fresh insights into unexplored topics (Smetherham, 1978) and enhanced rapport with someone who is empathetic to their experiences (Hockey, 1993). Throughout the research process, I mediated my subjectivity through constant reflection and the transparent process of thematic analysis.

From the beginning, I made it very clear to potential participants that I was currently an undergraduate studying at university without a family support network, and had a similar background to them, though it is uncertain whether not doing this would have impacted the recruitment and data collection process. The rationale for this was so that rapport from shared experience could be built and to attempt to reduce power inequalities created from research (Langellier, 1994). However, this may have resulted in greater risks of reduced objectivity and taking certain experiences and terms for granted (Miller, 1995). Indeed, my status as an 'insider' is likely limited, as researchers are only insiders to an extent due to privileges associated with the powerful position of asking the questions and directing the conversation (Hockey, 1993).

Participant contexts

This section will introduce each of the students who were interviewed. Bourdieu (1993) argues that habitus is 'linked to individual history' (p. 86), so this chapter aims to identify students' individual habitus and contexts to their studies and family estrangement. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 will consider their experiences in relation to the themes of finance, accommodation, and mental health. An overview of student demographics can be seen in Fig. 3.1.

Name	Age	Course	Course Year	University Location	University Pledged	Interview Method
Lauren	26	Counselling	2nd	North	✓	Email
Yoda	20	Law	2nd	Midlands	✓	Email
Jessica	20	Social Work	1st	South		Phone
Erica	23	Politics & Sociology	2nd	Midlands	✓	Skype
Jodie	22	Nursing	2nd	North	✓	Email
Stephen	24	Linguistics	1st	North		Phone

Figure 3.1: Participant Overview

Lauren

Lauren is 26 years old. She is in her second year of studying Counselling at a university in the North of England which has signed the Stand Alone Pledge. Lauren 'chose estrangement' for herself in 2017 after she was disowned in 2016, and is now estranged from her parents, grandparents, and siblings. I spoke to Lauren about her university experiences over email.

Yoda

Yoda is 20 years old, in his second year of studying Law. He attends a university in the Midlands which has signed the Stand Alone Pledge. Yoda is only in contact with his two grandparents and one of his siblings, which has been the case for seven years. Yoda chose to share his experiences via email.

Jessica

Jessica is 20 years old. She is in her first year of studying Social Work. Her university is located in the South of England, and it has not signed the Stand Alone Pledge. Jessica has contact with her siblings, but has no contact with her parents or extended family. Jessica and I spoke about her experiences in HE over phone.

Erica

Erica is a 24-year-old Politics and Sociology student. She is in the second year of her course, but has been studying for three years because she did a foundation year. Her university is in the Midlands and has signed the Stand Alone Pledge. Erica left her family home almost five years ago and lost contact

with her entire family, but has gradually got back in touch with some extended family members over time. I spoke to Erica about her university experiences in a Skype call.

Jodie

Jodie is 22 years old, in her second year of studying Children's Nursing. She studies at a university in the North of England which has signed the Stand Alone Pledge. She has had minimal contact with her father since a young age, and has had no contact with her mother or one of her grandparents for almost four years. Jodie chose to talk about her experiences of HE via email.

Stephen

Stephen is a 24-year-old in his first year of studying Linguistics. He attends a university in the North of England which has not signed the Stand Alone Pledge. I spoke to Stephen about his experiences of university so far over the phone. Stephen's background differs slightly to the other students in this study. Firstly, he has travelled from an EU country to study in England, meaning he only has access to the tuition fee loan and has no governmental support for his maintenance costs. Furthermore, he does not fit into the definition of

'estranged' within the HE sector; he is in contact with his mother, but she is unable to support him financially, and his father is dead. However, Stephen's story echoes the experiences shared by many of the other students in this study, and in previous research, and highlights the difficulties that students may face when trying to access support when they do not fit the labels of 'estrangement'.

This chapter has discussed this research's methodology. It has considered the qualitative framing of the study, the method and limitations of sampling, the interview methods (including the differences between voice and text interviews), and the methods of data analysis. It has also introduced the contexts for the six estranged students who were interviewed. The following three chapters will explore the experiences of these students, answering the research questions, within the themes of finance, accommodation, and mental health. The chapters will be divided into three sections: students' perceptions of barriers or positive experiences, support that students accessed from the university, and an in-depth discussion of a particular experience within that theme.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION (1): FINANCE

Within UK HE, financial support from the family is viewed to be 'complementary' alongside state support (Antonucci, 2016; Brooks, 2016). Without access to this support, estranged students are more reliant on alternative financial support, such as SLC packages and/or support from the university. If they cannot access this, or if they find this support insufficient to cover the costs of HE, students may have to budget more strictly or make sacrifices to aspects of their university experience to afford being there at all. This chapter will discuss how estranged students in this study perceived their financial situation and any support accessed. It will also discuss the implications of part-time work on estranged students' university experiences.

Perceptions of financial situation

All university students are able to access a tuition loan and postpone paying tuition fees, but some students with lower financial capital are more reliant on the tuition and means-tested maintenance loans offered by SLC. Antonucci (2016) argues that there is a mismatch between the assumed financial capital of the family based on household income and the financial support that students can actually access from this whilst studying. However, this mismatch is intensified for estranged students, who are at most only able to access the support designed for low-income students who can return to the family home during vacation periods (Stand Alone and UNITE, 2015). Additionally, the process to access these funds comes with further challenges for estranged students, as rather than providing evidence of family income they need to 'prove' their estrangement (Stand Alone, 2015).

All of the students interviewed in this study had applied for, and received, the SLC package for 'independent students', but some had negative experiences of the process. For example, Lauren notes that she found applying to be 'very distressing':

> They required a lot of evidence and at the time only a small amount
> of student finance staff were aware of estrangement and what it
> meant. I remember having to repeat myself a lot as I was passed
> from staff member to staff member.

The very notion of asking students to 'prove' that they are experiencing family estrangement, an often 'traumatic' process in itself (Dattilio & Nichols, 2011), suggests that the state desires to control their own financial capital to ensure that only those who are 'deserving' of that support receive it. Indeed, the 'evidence' Lauren and other estranged students need to provide has to be from a 'professional person', such as a social worker, doctor, or tutor, who has already 'proven' themselves to be a valued member of the community (SFE, 2016). However, Lauren's experiences of the lack of awareness of estrangement from the regulators of HE funding suggests that being 'outside' of the dominant social institution of the family is still stigmatised within the HE sector (Donzelot, 1977/1997). An awareness of these issues may have helped to initiate recent changes in the process, as SLC now provides students with a single staff member who will guide them through their application (SLC, 2018). As such, estranged students may now feel more confident in accessing financial support, as there are some signs that the 'ordinary discourse' shifts and becomes less stigmatising towards estrangement (Bourdieu, 2005).

Although the students interviewed had accessed SLC's financial support, many of the students interviewed experienced a shortfall in provision and had concerns about affording the costs of university. For example, Yoda appreciated the maintenance loan he received, but noted that 'I have to budget 24/7 because I don't have the safety blanket of being able to ask my parents', acknowledging his sense of having a dissimilar background to his peers (Bluff et al., 2012). In particular, estranged students had concerns about their financial situation for the rest of their studies. When Erica receives her university bursary, she puts it to the side for 'when I know I'll be short' in summer. Stephen worries even further ahead, saying that 'I'm always afraid that I'm not gonna be able to support myself financially for the next year'. This concern for the future may impact estranged students' ability to focus on their studies in the present and to benefit from the cultural and social capital that university experiences can offer.

Accessing financial support

Despite having accessed the financial packages offered by SLC, many of the estranged students interviewed were reliant on additional support from the university to make up for shortfalls in this state provision. All of the students interviewed had accessed either a tailored bursary for estranged students or a

general hardship fund to contribute towards their living costs, but this support was accessed in different ways. Jessica was able to access her university's bursary for estranged students because SLC informed the university of her 'independent' status, suggesting that though applying for SLC funds is challenging, it may act as a gateway to additional institutional support. Yoda discovered his university offered a bursary, and spoke to the dedicated contact for estranged students who sorted it out for him, suggesting that students can benefit from having a consistent support network within the institution to ease the process to access further support.

A number of factors may determine how much financial support estranged students can receive, and this can work out positively for some students. Jodie notes that 'Financially, I have been extremely fortunate at university' because of the range of financial support she can access: as a student nurse, her course is NHS-funded, and she receives the full NHS bursary because of her 'independent' status; she was also awarded the Unite Foundation Scholarship, organised by a charity which owns student accommodation, meaning that her accommodation for the entire duration of her course is free (UNITE Foundation, 2018). Jodie expresses much gratitude for this support which 'alleviates a massive amount of stress and anxiety surrounding finances whilst studying'.   Unfortunately, such a positive

combination of financial support is very unlikely for most estranged students, even for those in Jodie's position after the removal of NHS-funded courses and the changes from NHS bursaries to student loans (UK Government, 2017). This may especially be the case for students at universities who have not signed the Stand Alone Pledge or have not committed lots of resources to supporting estranged students.

Despite the ease that some students have in accessing financial support from their institution, stability of this support is not guaranteed. For example, the hardship fund that Stephen received this year supported him hugely in paying for his accommodation, but he will be forced to re-apply next year: 'I'm gonna have chance to get this hardship fund next year too. If not, I'm gonna just have another stressful semester'. Moreover, Jodie highlighted that a bursary she was eligible for in first year has since been abolished, meaning she can no longer access that support. As a result, estranged students may simultaneously experience instability in their family background from estrangement and the alternative support that they can access as a 'safety net'. Without the institution providing the stability of financial support usually offered by the family, estranged students may be more likely to withdraw from their studies (Stand Alone, 2015).

Part-time work

When students are unable to access enough financial support from the state or their university to cover their living costs, students may have to work part-time alongside their studies. Many students in the UK undertake part-time work during their studies, either to assist in funding their living costs or to enhance their employability skills (NUS, 2011). Antonucci (2016) suggests that part-time work may have negative implications on students' identities, as they need to negotiate between the positions of 'student' and 'worker'. Thus, students who have to engage in part-time work to afford the costs of their studies are at risk of not fully integrating into the HE field if their habitus conflicts between studies and work.

Indeed, part-time work did have some negative implications for the estranged students interviewed. As an EU student, Stephen cannot access a maintenance loan from the state for his living costs, so working part-time is a necessity for him to afford university. The job he had in his first semester had early morning shifts, which had a negative impact on both his academic work and his social life:

> If I've woken up at 5 o'clock in the morning on Friday I'm not going
> out on Friday night. Same if I have to wake up at 5 o'clock in the
> morning on Tuesday and have lectures at 1pm, I'm just going to be
> a zombie.

Similarly, Lauren identifies that working alongside her studies 'is difficult and can be challenging around my deadline dates'. Estranged students are placed in a contradictory position: they want to engage in the field of HE and the university experience to develop identities away from the family (Scharp & McLaren, 2017), yet at the same time are forced to sacrifice the important academic and social elements that make up this experience, simply so they can afford to be there at all. As such, estranged students may need to compromise on things that other students take for granted within HE, and may be forced away from the 'student' identity they wish to have.

Though working part-time can have negative impacts on the university experiences of estranged students, it may have positive influences in some circumstances for estranged students more than other 'non-traditional' groups. Both Stephen and Lauren identified that part-time work can help them to 'keep busy' when coping with other difficulties such as loneliness. Lauren said that part-time work 'helps to distract my mind from troubling trigger dates', such as Christmas and family birthdays. Thus, part-time work may provide a unique

opportunity for estranged students to develop the financial capital needed for them to inhabit the HE field, whilst also providing a coping mechanism for when they face distress which stems from their estrangement.

More than just supporting students to finance their studies, part-time work may help estranged students to foster a personal identity away from the family (Agllias, 2017a). For example, Lauren said that without her part-time income, 'I could not afford to live the way I do'. As estranged students have to negotiate their identity away from the family (Mabry, Giarrusso, & Bengtson, 2004), estranged students may benefit from the additional financial capital provided by part-time work if it allows students to explore this identity without risks of financial instability. Some estranged students may thus perceive part-time work to be not solely a necessity for survival in the HE field, but also an empowering, individual pursuit to develop personal identity away from the family habitus (Steel et al., 2012).

However, issues may arise when students want to prioritise their academic work and position themselves strongly as 'student' (Antonucci, 2016). Jodie describes how her nursing course makes it difficult to find part-time work:

> I work 40 hour weeks, on placements in hospitals doing 13.5 hour day shifts, night shifts, weekends etc. and most employers wouldn't accommodate for such fluctuating uni[versity] commitments.

Difficulties arise here for estranged students who need the additional finances from part-time work to afford their studies. Indeed, some elite universities do not allow students to work part-time except in exceptional circumstances (e.g. Oxford University, 2018), which may make estranged students feel that their habitus, with lower levels of financial capital, is incompatible with the field of these institutions (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Institutional barriers against working part-time may discourage students from applying at all if they feel they cannot afford it, or increase their risk of withdrawal (Stand Alone, 2015).

This chapter has discussed the financial issues and support mechanisms that the estranged students interviewed have experienced during their studies. Financial barriers seem to arise for estranged students from the point of access all the way through their student life-cycle and are intensified by the shortfalls in state provision and the inconsistency of institutional support. The results of this suggest that improving the accessibility of financial support and the amount available for estranged students is vital to create a sense of belonging for these students (Thomas, 2012).

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION (2): ACCOMMODATION

Without access to family support, estranged students may experience difficulties accessing and remaining in accommodation during their studies. They may struggle to find permanent accommodation if contracts are short-term, and without a family member to act as a guarantor estranged students may not be able to access some accommodation without paying large deposits. This chapter will discuss the issues with accommodation that the estranged students in this study have experienced, and the support with accommodation their universities have offered. It will also discuss how estranged students construct ideas of 'home' whilst studying.

Perceptions of housing situation

As discussed in Chapter 4, estranged students' lack of access to familial financial support and the difficulties in accessing alternative support from the state may make it more difficult for students to access affordable accommodation, especially as the cost of student accommodation rises in the UK (Barr & Marsh, 2016). Before starting her studies, Erica had to choose between paying the deposit for her accommodation and being able to pay for the train to get to university:

> When I was moving in I didn't actually have money for the train ticket, so I actually just got the train and prayed that no one asked me for my ticket, and thank God they didn't because I did not have any money.

Stephen's accommodation arrangements for next year are cheaper than his current rent, but further away from university which has raised some concerns for his future finances and social life:

> Right now, I know it's too early, but what I'm thinking is if I'm going out next year then I won't be able to come back by walk[ing] because at 3-at-night or 4-in-the-morning, 25 minutes walk will be

> too far, so I will be forced to call a cab. How many times can I afford
>
> to call a cab when I have to go back home?

These extracts from Erica and Stephen suggest that estranged students may have to compromise on aspects of university life that other students can take for granted. Indeed, if estranged students are unable to afford the accommodation situated closest to the institutional field, this may increase a sense that they are incompatible with that field and do not 'fit in' there (Reay et al., 2010).

However, financial limitations are not the only factor affecting accommodation for estranged students. Without access to the cultural capital embodied within the family (Bourdieu, 1986), estranged students may not have access to advice and support about accommodation, and thus face barriers in trying to access stable accommodation arrangements. For example, the bulk of Erica's issues so far at university have concerned accommodation; without a guarantor and because of accommodation providers' short-term contracts, Erica has had to move many times in her three years of university. She notes that this instability in her housing arrangements means she has to 'think about it all the time', and moving is 'a lot of hassle and just unsettling in general'. If estranged students are threatened with homelessness during their studies, this may impact their ability to focus on enjoying the university experience (Stand

Alone and UNITE, 2015), potentially reducing students' sense of belonging within the institution (Thomas, 2012).

Some estranged students interviewed had positive experiences with accommodation, or at least did not raise any issues with their housing situation. Jodie expressed her gratitude for the Unite Foundation Scholarship she receives as it 'enables me to fully commit myself to my course without worrying about rent or affording food', and Yoda noted that 'other than moving from a double bed to a single there have been no real issues'.   This demonstrates how accessing accommodation support can help estranged students to fully engage within the field of HE and enjoy their university experiences (Bathmaker et al., 2016).

Accessing accommodation support

Financial support offered by universities may assist estranged students to access and remain in their accommodation. For example, Stephen received a hardship fund from his university and notes that without those funds 'I probably wouldn't be able to pay back accommodation to be honest', showing how this support may alleviate some pressures around accommodation costs. Lauren was also able to access a hardship fund to help her with accommodation, but

only when 'I experienced homelessness and found myself sofa surfing for a considerable amount of months'. Though support was offered, there seems to be limitations in how accessible this support is for students, as Lauren only accessed it after being homeless for a long time. As such, universities may be unintentionally perpetuating a self-blame narrative, whereby students are told that they do not deserve support unless they are in 'enough' hardship (Smit, 2012). Estranged students may refrain from accessing this support if they feel they're not eligible for it, though it is not certain whether this was the case for any of the students interviewed in this research.

Universities may be able to provide accommodation for estranged students to prevent them from experiencing homelessness or facing difficulties with private management companies. For example, Jessica, Erica, and Lauren were all offered a place in university halls over the summer when all the other students left, providing stable accommodation arrangements over the vacation period where estranged students are most at risk of homelessness (Stand Alone and UNITE, 2015). Jessica's university also allows students who cannot find external accommodation to stay in university halls for the duration of their studies; though she will be living with her peers in second year, offering these support options may help estranged students to not worry too much about organising accommodation. When Lauren chose to live in university halls, she

received one-to-one help with the application forms and the university gave her some essential items such as 'cutlery, bedding, and duvets and cushions when I first moved in', helping Lauren to cover some of the 'hidden costs' that these items add to accommodation costs (Jacobs, 2015).

Universities may also offer to help students access other accommodation and ensure that their family circumstances are taken into consideration by their providers. For Erica, the university's estrangement designated contact supported her with accommodation and 'was there to support you and speak to your accommodation on your behalf and say "she can't keep moving in and out, it's really not helpful".' Yoda, Jodie, and Lauren also expressed their appreciation for their university's dedicated contact in signposting them to support, answering questions, and keeping an eye on them as they study. The designated contact within the institution may therefore work as a substitute for the personal support that most students receive from their families, and act to allow estranged students to access the cultural capital they may need to successfully navigate within the HE field (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990).

The 'home'

This section will discuss how the estranged students in this study engaged with the concept of 'home' whilst at university. Different to the physical structure of the 'house', the 'home' is symbolically connected to ideas of the 'family' (Rykwart, 1991). There is a sense that the 'home' is an ideal for the stability and identity that society believes families provide to individuals (Steel et al., 2012; Wright, 1993). This discourse is echoed in the HE sector, as some universities only provide term-time accommodation because of the expectation that students 'go home', i.e. return to the family, during vacation periods. For example, though no research looks at how HE students conceptualise 'home', there is a widespread notion that students experience 'homesickness' and miss the family when they go to university (Bhardwa, 2017). These norms may create issues for estranged students who do not have access to the 'family home'.

The estranged students in this research engaged with the idea of 'home' in two ways: they either viewed themselves as at a deficit for not having a family 'home' to return to, or they tried to reconstruct the term and engage with the university field as their new 'home'. These differing conceptualisations suggest a conflict between the 'ordinary discourse' which has accepted these

family-oriented ideas of 'home' from 'family discourse', and the attempts of individual estranged students to redefine these concepts (Bourdieu, 2005; Scharp & Thomas, 2016).

For example, Lauren, Jessica, and Jodie were all conscious of their differing 'home' contexts to their peers, all highlighting that they were unable to 'go home' in the summer and had to remain at university.   There was a sentiment that this triggered feelings of isolation for these students, who may view their 'home' situation as at a deficit compared to other students (Field & Morgan-Klein, 2010). Moreover, the risk of homelessness from the temporary nature of much university accommodation, as discussed in the previous section, may make it difficult for estranged students to fully transform their university room into the 'home' associated with ideals of identity and stability (Mallett, 2004; Morgan, 1996).

However, some of the estranged students interviewed were determined to reconstruct the concept of 'home' while at university. In particular, Jodie was very open about her experiences of homelessness and the impacts of this on her concepts of 'home':

> I find perhaps the most difficult part of it all is the lack of a place
> to call "home". I grew up in the [location] area, but was made
> homeless at the age of 18. I was fortunate enough to live with

> different friends until last year when I moved to [location] to start
> uni[versity]. As a result, my university flat has now become my
> "home".

Given the physical space to do so, Jodie has tried to construct her flat into a comfortable environment and foster her personal identity within her university 'home'. Jodie is supported in this by the Unite Foundation Scholarship she receives, meaning she has guaranteed stability of remaining in that 'home' until her graduation. This security may not be guaranteed for other students without financial support, but the university room may provide a unique opportunity for estranged students to have a 'home' as a place of identity, which may be particularly valuable for students whose reasons for estrangement are attributed to intrapersonal reasons (Carr et al., 2015; Scharp, 2014).

As estranged students work to redefine the 'home' away from the family, they may feel that it can become larger than the physical entity of the 'house'. For example, Lauren identifies that the support from the staff at her university 'has enabled me to continue my studies and find a place I can call my home'. Indeed, if the institutional support networks resemble those of the ideal supportive family, it is possible that the institution as a whole can become the 'home' for estranged students. Thus, a non-judgemental, accessible support network fostered by the university can have many positive impacts on

estranged students' sense of 'belonging' within the university field (Thomas, 2012).

This chapter has discussed the experiences with accommodation that estranged students face at university. Without the option to return to the family 'home' away from university, estranged students need to either reconstruct the term within the field to be a source of identity and stability (Wright, 1993), or accept a sense of deficit. Creating a 'home' environment at the university is complicated by a range of financial barriers and a lack of awareness of estrangement by accommodation providers.   Thus, it is important that universities offer support for students to foster these home environments, such as providing accommodation, and ensure this support is visible and accessible for students who need it.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION (3): MENTAL HEALTH

Family estrangement can be a long, complex, and distressing process for individuals (Agllias, 2017a; Dattilio & Nichols, 2011), so estranged students may experience difficulties with their mental health. Stigmas associated with estrangement may prevent estranged students from disclosing their family circumstances to their peers or university, which may lead to isolation (Stand Alone & Blake, 2015). This chapter will discuss how the estranged students interviewed perceived their mental health and any support they received from the university. It will also discuss the role of peers as a network which has the potential to either intensify or alleviate mental health issues.

Perceptions of mental health

Similar to the experiences of care leavers at university (Harrison, 2017), many of the estranged students had experienced isolation during their studies because of the absence of a traditional 'family' support network. Jessica identifies that she finds university 'quite difficult sometimes because you don't really have that person you can call and confide in about issues you're facing or just some reassurance'. Jodie says that 'I often find myself leaving work [placements] and wishing I had someone to call or visit when I've had a particularly bad day'. Both of these accounts have the sentiment that the day-to-day experiences can create stresses for all students, but that those who are estranged from their families lack a vital support network needed to alleviate these concerns. Thus, estranged students may feel that they are, as Jodie said, 'dealing with things on my own', and are potentially at risk of having reduced feelings of belonging if they feel isolated in the institution (Thomas, 2012).

Estranged students may be more at risk of experiencing loneliness at university around 'trigger dates' (Agllias, 2017a). For example, Jodie says that during Christmas, 'I find myself being hyper-aware that I have no family'. There is a very strong family-oriented discourse to the holiday season (Stand Alone,

2018c), which carries into the HE sector as the institution closes and many students travel 'home' to spend the Christmas vacation with family. Thus, estranged students who have had to negotiate their identity away from the family may feel that their 'differentiated self' (Agllias, 2017a) is incompatible with the identities of others within the university, and perhaps by extension of the field HE itself (Reay et al., 2010).

Estranged students may also experience specific mental health issues alongside their studies. In her interview, Lauren was quite open about a range of mental health difficulties she has experienced, and said that 'processing and balancing these alongside full time study, part time work and life in general is incredibly challenging. In the context of what is considered to be a 'mental health crisis' within the HE sector, where university students face financial difficulties and anxiety about future employment (HEi-Know, 2017), universities are working to improve mental health provisions, providing estranged students with an accessible alternative support network to the family. However, the extent to which this can be achieved is limited when cuts are being made to counselling services across the country, both within and outside of the HE sector (Brown, 2016; Buchan, 2018), risking unstable support for estranged students.

Although estrangement can lead to mental health difficulties, a few students identified that it has helped to improve their wellbeing at university (Agllias, 2017a). Yoda identifies that his estrangement has enabled him to become more independent, saying that 'As I have developed as a person and became older it put things into perspective that I can do things, I am not limited by what has happened'. Similarly, though Lauren experiences mental health difficulties as a result of her estrangement, she notes that 'I want to fuel my experience into helping other[s] and enabling others to avoid the experience I have endured', and notes that she feels 'empowered' to work with her university to improve their support mechanisms. This sense of empowerment from both Yoda and Lauren suggests that the discourse in some universities' Pledge letters which views estranged students as victims is a reductionist view of the complexities surrounding family estrangement. Thus, universities should ensure that these stigmas are not perpetuated in their support mechanisms by involving estranged students in the process of developing this support.

Accessing mental health support

The estranged students interviewed had accessed a range of support from their universities for mental health. For example, Lauren had accessed support from

the counselling service, and Jessica regularly met with a student support worker where 'they just check that I'm OK emotionally and whether I need any more support with my mental health or need more support with finances or anything like that'. If estranged students are able to access this from their universities, they may find counselling to be an alternative stable support network to the family (Steel et al., 2012).

Rather than just offering staff-delivered emotional support, many of the students interviewed had been given opportunities to meet others at their institution who were estranged from their families. Jessica and Erica noted that they have worked to build up a forum for estranged students to meet, sometimes in collaboration with charity Stand Alone, allowing students to be 'in contact with other people experiencing the same thing as you' (Jessica). Without a family support network, meeting others who have a similar habitus of family estrangement within the institutional field may help students to feel that their background is not so dissimilar to others, and improve a sense of belonging (Bluff et al., 2012; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Stephen and Yoda were both offered opportunities to meet other estranged students through social events or group support workshops, but both chose not to attend these events, though did not say why. As such, universities should work to ensure that such events are advertised to all students in a way which reduces stigmas

associated with talking about mental health and with family estrangement (Stand Alone & Blake, 2015).

When providing support in mental health, and in general, it is important that universities do not become overbearing on students. For example, when asked how universities could improve their support mechanisms, Yoda said:

> Knowing there is support to take advantage of [and] knowing you can use it, but also knowing that if you decide not to you don't have to use it. Labelling and stigma are a hard pill to swallow and constant emails checking up on you telling you to do this and do that are a nightmare and end up being frustrating.

For estranged students, whose estrangement may have been triggered by clashing values or expectations (Carr et al., 2015), universities should take care to ensure that they do not unintentionally replicate these negative experiences. They need to ensure that they strike a balance between positively supporting students in accessing the support they need and becoming *in loco parentis*, acting as a parent and infantilising students (Cooper, 2017). A suitable way to ensure this and improve university's support mechanisms, as suggested by most of the students interviewed, would be to ensure that support is publicised well and made visible so that students can choose whether they wish to access it.

The role of peers

Estranged students who do not have access to traditional family support may be more reliant on alternative support networks, such as peers. The estranged students in this study viewed their peers in two ways, either as different to themselves and intensifying their feelings of isolation, or as an important support network alleviating this loneliness.

The university experience for students who are estranged from their families differs to that of other 'non-traditional' groups due to their background. Estranged students have no family 'home' to return to and no family members to call whilst at university. The HE sector assumes and takes for granted notions of family support, especially as the financial system for HE is entirely dependent on family background and assumes that support, both material and symbolic, is accessible to students. Thus, estranged students may experience isolation in a variety of instances where they are positioned as different to their peers.

Such positioning can occur in a variety of settings within the HE field. For example, Lauren identifies that on her course, students are sometimes asked to talk about their family as an ice-breaker activity, which she says makes her feel 'lonely and isolated'. Feelings of difference can also occur outside of the

classroom too; Jessica notes that 'when other people speak about their parents and things, it's quite upsetting knowing how they have all that support there for them [...] and that you don't really have that'. Yoda faces this sense of difference within his university 'home' too, as 'my flatmates have their families over sometimes which is difficult to take sometimes'. Estranged students may feel that their habitus which has an absence of family sets them apart from their peers at the institution, and students may need to negotiate themselves to 'fit in' or exclude themselves from these encounters in the field (Reay et al., 2010).

There is the sense that estranged students may feel that they struggle to 'connect' with those who are not sharing an experience of estrangement. Jessica notes that she 'can't really relate to the people around you that don't experience [estrangement] as well'.   Similarly, Stephen demonstrates his difference to peers:

> Their main issue is like "uh oh, I'm not talking with my friend anymore", or "my girlfriend broke with me", and my main issue sometimes is like "oh for fuck's sake, I can't afford this plan tonight" [...] Sometimes I feel that we're not really going a same way, we're like at two different heights.

Jessica and Stephen's quotes suggest that estranged students may feel ostracised from their peers if they feel that their experiences are too dissimilar

to those around them. Indeed, Erica notes that she finds herself censoring her speech around peers:

> I'm always hesitant to talk about my family; I don't really bring it up in the act of conversation like other people do, without thinking, and to begin with I used to feel quite awkward if someone asked me about my family because I just didn't really want to bring it up. [...] Maybe it impacted a deep connection with a friend, a close friendship, because I've always left that part out about myself.

Though estranged students have to negotiate their identity away from the family and create a 'differentiated self' (Agllias, 2017a), this may prevent estranged students from developing a strong alternative support network if there are stigmas associated with being different from peers.

Despite these differences, peers can be an important substitute support network for estranged students and can help to enable a sense of belonging for estranged students at their institution (Thomas, 2012). Most of the estranged students interviewed identified some support that peers had offered during their studies, and the importance of this support network for them.

Peers provided a range of practical support for the estranged students interviewed. For example, Jodie's peers allowed her to stay with their families

when she was homeless prior to university and during the Christmas vacations, suggesting that some peers are willing to react against the biological associations in 'family discourse' themselves to allow those who do not fit into it (Bourdieu, 2005).

Peers may also act as a gateway to accessing professional support. Yoda notes that his close friend who was aware of his family circumstances recommended that he tries a counselling-type service: 'Initially I was like no way, after some time it seemed like a good idea'. Similarly, Stephen was not aware of support his university offered, but his ex-girlfriend signposted him to a stall at the university who was advertising what they offer for students without family support: 'It was a really lucky moment; if it wasn't for my ex-girlfriend I would never see that money'. Estranged students may thus be able to access the cultural capital from other students' families to be able to navigate more comfortably within the HE field (Bourdieu, 1986).

Peers can also become important emotional support networks for estranged students. For Jessica, her boyfriend acts as an alternative support network to her family: 'Where other people go and speak to their parents about how things are going, I would speak to him [...] If I didn't have him, I would just be a bit on my own'. Yoda appreciates the support from his sports team at university who are unaware of his family circumstances but still help to 'keep

me sane' and provide 'life saving' support. Thus, estranged students are able to navigate within the field of HE to find alternative support networks, and for some students may be what prevents them from withdrawing from the university (Stand Alone, 2015; Tinto, 1993).

In some cases, peers may be important and become symbolically associated with family for estranged students. Some groups reconstruct the term 'family' for any close relationships (Silva & Smart, 1999; Weeks et al., 1999), which estranged students may also do. For example, Lauren explicitly says 'I have an amazing, reliable, strong support network from my friendship group. They really all have become the family I have chosen'. This may be a reflection of how the subjective meaning of family is being reconstructed and shifts in 'family discourse' may be occurring in the HE sector (Bourdieu, 2005).

This chapter has discussed how estranged students experience mental health and any support they access while at university. The distressing nature of family estrangement makes mental health difficulties likely for estranged students (Dattilio & Nichols, 2011). Without access to a stable emotional support network from the family, estranged students may be more reliant on alternative networks like the institution or peers. However, stigmas associated with estrangement may prevent students from disclosing their family circumstances, especially if they feel dissimilar to the other students within the

HE field (Reay et al., 2010). Thus, universities could work to raise awareness of family estrangement to staff and students across the whole university and reduce stigmas, allowing estranged students to foster more belonging within their institution (Stand Alone, 2015).

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

This dissertation aimed to research the experiences of estranged students at universities across England. It has highlighted some of the commonalities and complexities in how this group of 'non-traditional' students navigate the field of HE (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Chapters 4, 5, and 6 addressed the themes of finance, accommodation, and mental health individually to answer the research questions.

The estranged students interviewed have faced a range of challenges during their studies so far. Financial issues for the estranged students interviewed included difficulties in accessing SLC support, meaning some had to work part-time or compromise on aspects of the HE experience to allow

them to be there at all.   The participants experienced difficulties with accommodation, namely practical barriers and a lack of awareness of estrangement, meaning that they struggled to foster a 'home' environment at the university. Mental health issues were also encountered by the participants during their studies; one student mentioned specific mental health issues, but all students experienced isolation or stigma due to a difference in their family background.   Though these issues were separated into themes to allow for more structured discussion, the participants did not explicitly categorise their experiences in this way.

To tackle some of these challenges, the participants accessed a range of support from various sources. All students had accessed financial support from their university in the form of either a bursary or hardship fund. Some students used their bursary to minimise the impacts of accommodation issues and foster a 'home' environment, for example by setting aside some of the bursary to prevent homelessness over summer.   Other universities offered direct support with these issues, which participants found helpful. The students interviewed also accessed support for mental health, such as counselling and support groups for estranged students.   Other peers provided support to participants by offering practical support and acting as an alternative family.

When asked how universities could improve their existing support mechanisms, students tended to answer in relation to one of the following themes:

- Providing specific support in the areas of finance, accommodation, and mental health;

- Publicising this support to the entire student body;

- Raising awareness of family estrangement to staff; and

- Allowing students to choose which support they want to access.

Limitations

It is important to recognise the limitations of this study. The most significant limitation is the small sample size (n=6). While the study did not aim to generalise or to build a model of how all estranged students experience HE, there is insufficient data to say that these experiences reported are typical. The results do tend to agree with the findings from other research into estranged students, as discussed in the literature review.

Another issue with the sample is that it is self-selecting. This was a necessary limitation for the study, as it was not possible to contact all

estranged students and select a representative sample. The participants are therefore more likely to be those who were more comfortable with their family circumstances, or those who have had more extreme positive or negative experiences. The sample may also be limited to students at universities who provide good support for estranged students, as those who are not conscious of estranged students' issues may not have advertised this study to their students.

This research had limitations with the sample. The self-selecting nature of the sample means that participants were likely to be those who were more comfortable with their family circumstances, or those who have had more extreme positive or negative experiences, which may mean that some complexities of experience have not been addressed. Moreover, the sample was geographically limited to universities in England and Wales, and the experiences of postgraduate students were not studied.   As such, the experiences of estranged students within other institutions and at other levels of study could be examined in future research.

Recommendations for future research

Future research could build on this study by using narrative methods to build a comprehensive picture of estranged students' contexts and habitus within the HE field. Narrative methods would allow for more in-depth insights into the intricacies of estranged students' HE experiences.

It could be interesting to compare the experiences of those who fit into the strict definition of 'estranged students' within the HE sector and those who have no family support but do not fit the strict definition. Research could also compare the experiences of students at universities which have and have not signed the Stand Alone Pledge to see how the pledged support is implemented in practice and whether or not this support is effective.

Furthermore, future research into estranged students' experiences could use a case study design within one institution. This would allow the studied institution to have actionable feedback to take forward and use to improve their support mechanisms in that specific context.

Recommendations for institutions

Although the results of this research alone are not generalisable, when taken in the context of the prior research discussed in the literature review, it is possible to make some recommendations to HE institutions.

All participants in this study agreed that the provision for estranged students was lacking, specifically in the areas of finance, accommodation, and mental health. However, the students' accounts of their experiences, which are cross-categorical in nature, indicate that universities should work to develop holistic support mechanisms for students.

It is important to make these support mechanisms clearly visible and accessible to students once implemented. Some participants argued that making the available support clear was vital, which may be especially important when trying to support students who do not fit into the strict definition of estrangement.

If institutions focus on improving the general awareness of family estrangement, stigmas within the institution would be diminished and it would allow students to feel more comfortable disclosing their family circumstances. It could also be helpful to work towards a shift in the family-oriented discourse of

the HE sector.   Awareness raising campaigns should be run to improve awareness of estrangement, making it easier for students across the institution to support their estranged peers, and to encourage estranged students to access peer support.

PART II

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PART III

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

PLEDGED INSTITUTIONS

What follows is a list of all institutions that have signed the Stand Alone Pledge as of 19/04/2018. Stand Alone (2018e) maintains an up-to-date list. The institutions are ordered alphabetically.

- Bath Spa University
- Blackpool & The Fylde College
- Cardiff University
- De Montfort University
- Keele University
- Kingston University
- Liverpool John Moores University
- London Contemporary Dance School
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- Queen Mary University of London

- Bishop Grosseteste University
- Brunel University London
- City University London
- Goldsmiths College
- King's College London
- Leeds Beckett University
- Liverpool University
- Loughborough University
- Middlesex University
- Ravensbourne

- Sheffield Hallam University
- Swansea University
- University of Brighton
- University of Derby
- University of Glasgow
- University of Leicester
- University of Portsmouth
- University of Sheffield
- University of Sunderland
- University of The West Of Scotland
- University of Wolverhampton

- St Mary's University Twickenham London
- University College London
- University of Central Lancashire
- University of Exeter
- University of Leeds
- University of Plymouth
- University of Salford
- University of Strathclyde
- University of The West Of England
- University of Westminster
- West College Scotland

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT MATERIALS

Poster

The poster was designed to be more visually appealing to potential participants than just attaching text into the emails to designated contacts and students' union officers. The poster was used in these emails, as well as in my social media posts. Text descriptions were also provided in social media posts.

ARE YOU AN UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT AT UNIVERSITY WITHOUT FAMILY SUPPORT?

My name is Amie Key: I'm a third year Education Studies student at Durham University.

For my dissertation, I am investigating the experiences of students who, like myself, study without a family support network.

The purpose of the research is to explore the issues that students without family support face, the support that universities offer to support students, and how students find this support, if they access it.

If you choose to take part, you will be asked to have a 20-45 minute interview to talk about your experiences. This will be either face-to-face (North East England only), or via phone, skype, or email.

If you would like more information or to take part, please email me at: **amie.n.key@durham.ac.uk**

The text says:

Are you an undergraduate student at university without family support?

My name is Amie Key: I'm a third year Education Studies student at Durham University.

For my dissertation, I am investigating the experiences of students who, like myself, study without a family support network.

The purpose of the research is to explore the issues that students without family support face, the support that universities offer, and how students find this support, if they access it.

You are free to decide whether or not you would like to participate. If you choose to take part, you will be asked to have a 20-45 minute interview to talk about your experiences. This will be either face-to-face (North East England only), or via phone, Skype, or email.

You are free to stop the interview or withdraw from the study at any time with no negative consequences. All responses will be anonymised and kept confidential.

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for your participation, it is hoped that the findings of this study will help to improve the support that universities offer to students without family support networks, potentially helping other students in a similar position in the future!

If you would like more information or to take part, please email me at: amie.n.key@durham.ac.uk.

Email template to designated contacts

Dear [name],

My name is Amie Key: I'm a third-year Education Studies student at Durham University. I found your email on the list of dedicated contacts on Stand Alone's website.

For my dissertation, I am exploring the experiences of estranged students at university. I am emailing you today to ask whether you would be able to distribute the attached poster which advertises my research to any estranged students you work with at [university].

As the poster says, the purpose of my dissertation is to explore the issues that estranged students face, the support that their university offers, and how students find this support. Participants will be asked to have a 20-45 minute interview with me to talk about their experiences at university. The research aims to gain insight into individuals' experiences and to see what universities can do to better support estranged students!

This project is supervised by Dr Rille Raaper from the School of Education at Durham. This research has been reviewed and approved by the Durham University School of Education Ethics Sub-Committee (date of approval: 02/11/2017).

I would be incredibly grateful if you could forward the poster on to any estranged students that you work with. I am also able to answer any questions you have about my research, so please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards, Amie Key

Email template to students' union officers

Dear [name],

My name is Amie Key: I'm a third-year Education Studies student at Durham University.

For my dissertation, I am exploring the experiences of estranged students at university. I am emailing you today to ask whether you would be able to distribute the attached poster which advertises my research to any estranged students you work with at [university].

As the poster says, the purpose of my dissertation is to explore the issues that estranged students face, the support that their university offers, and how students find this support. Participants will be asked to have a 20-45 minute interview with me to talk about their experiences at university. The research aims to gain insight into individuals' experiences and to see what universities can do to better support estranged students!

This project is supervised by Dr Rille Raaper from the School of Education at Durham. This research has been reviewed and approved by the Durham University School of Education Ethics Sub-Committee (date of approval: 02/11/2017).

I understand it's a busy time of year for SU Officers, but I'd greatly appreciate any help you could give. I am also able to answer any questions you have about my research, so please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards, Amie Key

Email template to potential participants

Dear [name],

Thank you for your reply and for your interest in taking part in my dissertation!

I have attached a Participation Information Sheet which has more information about the study and a Consent Form - please read both of those carefully. You don't need to fill in the consent form just yet, but you'll need to before the interview.

If you have any questions about either, or any other questions about the study, please ask!

As you're in [location of university], we won't be able to have a face-to-face interview, but you can choose which interview type you would like to have based on what you are comfortable with and your availability:

- Skype call

- Telephone call

- Email chat

Please let me know which method you would prefer, and when you are available in the coming weeks.

Best wishes, Amie Key

APPENDIX C ──────────────────────────────────
                                                                    │
  │   │
  └─────────────────────────── INTERVIEWS PROCEDURE

Guide for voice interviews

The interview guide for voice interviews is on the following page. This was not used as a strict guide, but was used to help the structure during interviews. In practice, interviews varied a lot based on how the students responded to the first question in Part 2.

[NOTE] This structure was used as a framework for my interviews. The interview structure is semi-structured, meaning that this template was used to guide the interviewer through the topics and was not to be used as a strict script to follow. Prior to the interview, students had the opportunity to ask me questions via email, and all participants had signed the informed consent form prior to the interview beginning.

Briefing

Hello, is this X?

Hi X, this is Amie Key. How are you?

Is this a good time to talk?

Great. Before we start, are you okay with this call being recorded?

- *If yes:* Okay, I'll just turn it on...
- *If no:* Okay, that's fine.

Okay so, I'm just going to tell you a little bit about myself and the study. Is that okay?

Great. So, I'm a third-year student at Durham University. For my Education Studies dissertation, I am exploring the experiences of students who, like myself, do not have family support while at university. As the Participant Information Sheet says, I want to look at the issues that students without family support face at university, the support that students access at university, and how they find this support.

This interview will begin with me asking a few questions about you, before we go into the main part. In this, I will ask you some questions, which are open for you to say as much as you want, about the issues you may have faced, the support you may have received, and how you found it. Everything you say will be kept confidential and anonymised. You are free to withdraw from the interview and the study at any time, with no negative consequences for you. The interview should take 45 minutes at most.

Before we start, do you have any questions?

1

Part One: About Them

Okay, so we'll just start off with some quick questions about you, just to get some background.

- Do you mind me asking how old you are?
- You go to X University, yes? [A lot of students responded via their university email, or said where they go in emails]
- What do you study?
- What year are you in?

Now, I'd like to briefly ask you about your lack of family contact. You don't need to go into any detail here, but please briefly tell me about who you're not in contact with and how long this has been the case.

Thank you for sharing this with me.

Part Two: Experiences of Issues Faced

Now, let's move on to the main part of the interview. I'd like to ask you about how your lack of family support has influenced your X years at university.

To begin, can you please tell me about what issues you have faced because of your lack of contact with your [family member/s]?

Some questions I could ask if they need more guidance:

- How have your family circumstances affected your **finance** while at university?
- What issues have you experienced with **accommodation**, if any?
- If you don't mind me asking, how has your lack of family contact affected your **mental health and wellbeing** at university?
- Do you think you have faced any **stigma** because of your family circumstances?
- Are there any other issues you've faced?

Some probes that could be used:

- You said X... can you tell me a little bit more about that?
- What do you mean by X? Could you give some examples?

2

- Can you tell me a little bit more about X?
- What makes you feel that way about X?

Part Three: Experiences with Support

Thank you for talking to me about these issues you've faced at university. Now, I'd like to ask you about any support you have had to deal with these issues.

Questions about university support:

- Do you know what support your university offers?
- What support have you accessed at your university?
- How have you found this support?
- What do you think could have been better?
- Has there been a particular member of staff who has helped you? How?

Questions about alternative support:

- Have you received support from anyone else? Who from?
- How have you found this support?
- What do they do to support you?

Some probes that could be used:

- You said X... can you tell me a little bit more about that?
- What do you mean by X? Could you give some examples?
- Can you tell me a little bit more about X?
- What makes you feel that way about X?

Thank you so much for your answers. I'd like to ask one more thing: What would you recommend that universities do to better support students without family support like yourself?

Debriefing

Thank you for sharing this with me. That is the end of the questions. Do you have anything else you would like to add, about anything we've talked about so far and anything you think we've missed?

3

Great, thank you so much for having this interview. Just to reiterate, as the Participant Information Sheet said, this interview is part of my dissertation to explore the experiences of students who do not have a family support network. If you have anything else you want to follow up with or add, please do get in touch on my email, which you should have.

Just a couple of final questions. Once my dissertation is completed, would you like a copy of it? It's completely up to you.

Also, as the Participant Information Sheet said, there will be no way to connect your name to your responses in my dissertation or any other work following on from this. To do this, everyone has a pseudonym. Would you like to choose your own pseudonym or would you like me to choose one for you?

Okay, great, that's the end of the interview. Thank you so much. I will turn off the recording now.

[turn off recording]

[I will allow the participant to ask me any further questions they didn't want to ask while it was recording]

4

Guide for text interviews

This guide was sent directly to students to fill in their answers.

These questions are split into three parts: some background about you, the experiences of issues you've faced, and any support you have received whilst studying. You can say as much or as little as you want for the questions, but please do write in prose rather than in bullet points.

Once you've sent your answers, I will email back. I may ask some further questions about some things you have said in previous answers, but you can say as much or as little with this as you want.

Part One: Background about you

For the research

1. Would you like a copy of the dissertation once it is completed?
2. As the Participant Information Sheet said, all of your responses will be anonymous – this will be done by giving you a pseudonym. Would you like to choose your own, or should I choose it for you?

About your studies

1. How old are you? (if you don't mind me asking!)
2. What do you study?
3. What year are you in?
4. Are you enjoying your studies so far?

About your family contact

Can you please briefly tell me about your lack of contact with your family: who you're not in contact with and how long this has been the case. You don't need to go into much detail here at all.

Part Two: Experiences of University

Can you please tell me about the experiences you have had at university because of your lack of contact with your family? These things may be positive or negative – you can write freely about what has been important for you. If you're not sure what to say, here are some questions you can consider when writing:

1. How have your family circumstances affected your financial situation at university?
2. What issues have you experienced with accommodation, if any?
3. How has your lack of family contact impacted your mental health and wellbeing?
4. Are there any other issues or positive experiences you've had at university because of your family circumstances?

Part Three: Support at University

I'd now like to ask **what support you've had at university** to deal with any issues you've had.

1. Do you know what support your university offers?
2. What support have you accessed from them?
3. How was this support?
4. What do you think could have been better?
5. Has there been a particular member of staff who has been helpful? How?

I'd also like to ask about **any other support you've had whilst at university** but not provided by the university itself.

1. Have you received support from anyone else (e.g. friends, student-led groups, external groups)? Who from?
2. What did they do to support you?
3. How have you found this support?

I'd like to ask finally: **What would you recommend that universities do to better support students without family support like yourself?**

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Thank you so much for taking the time to answer all of these questions. As I said, I will email back to thank you again for your responses and to potentially ask some further questions.

APPENDIX D

ETHICS

Participant information sheet

The Participant Information Sheet explains to students the purpose of the research, what their participation involves, and the ethics of the study. It follows on the next page.

Shaped by the past, creating the future

Durham
University
School of Education

08/03/2018

Participant Information Sheet

Title: Experiencing University as a Student without Family Support

You are invited to take part in a research study investigating the experiences of students at university without a family support network. Please read this form carefully and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

The study is conducted by Amie Key as part of her BA Education Studies at Durham University.

This research project is supervised by Rille Raaper (rille.raaper@durham.ac.uk) from the School of Education at Durham University.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how university students who do not have contact with their parents experience university. The study aims to explore in detail the issues that individuals without family support commonly face, the support that their university offers to them, and how students find this support.

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to take part in an interview where you will be asked some questions about your experiences at university as a student without family support. You will be briefly asked at the start about your university and course, and how long you have not had family support for. The main part of the interview will ask you questions about particular issues that you may have faced, the support that you may or may not have taken from your university, and whether you thought that support was helpful.

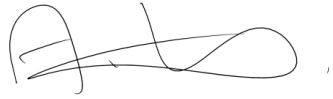Depending on your availability, your participation in this study will take approximately 20-45 minutes.

You are free to decide whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without any negative consequences for you. It is possible that by reflecting on your experiences you may experience negative emotions and feelings. If you experience distress during the interview, you are free to stop the interview at any time and withdraw your participation from the study with no negative consequences.

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for your participation, it is hoped that the findings of this study will help to improve the support that universities provide for students without family support networks, potentially helping other students in a similar position in the future.

All responses you give or other data collected will be kept confidential. The records of this study will be kept secure and private. All files containing any information you give are password protected. In any research report that may be published, no information will be included that will make it possible to identify you individually. There will be no way to connect your name to your responses at any time during or after the study.

If you have any questions, requests or concerns regarding this research, please contact me via email at amie.n.key@durham.ac.uk or by telephone at 07736105946.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the School of Education Ethics Sub-Committee at Durham University (date of approval: 02/11/2017).

Amie Key

Consent form

Shaped by the past, creating the future

Durham University
School of Education

Declaration of Informed Consent

- I agree to participate in this study, the purpose of which is to explore the experiences faced by students who do not have family support whilst at university.
- I have read the participant information sheet and understand the information provided.
- I have been informed that I may decline to answer any questions or withdraw from the study without penalty of any kind.
- I have been informed that data collection will involve the use of audio recording devices.
- I have been informed that all of my responses will be kept confidential and secure, and that I will not be identified in any report or other publication resulting from this research.
- I have been informed that the investigator will answer any questions regarding the study and its procedures. Amie Key, School of Education, Durham University can be contacted via email: amie.n.key@durham.ac.uk or telephone: 07736105946.
- I will be provided with a copy of this form for my records.

Any concerns about this study should be addressed to the School of Education Ethics Sub-Committee, Durham University via email to ed.ethics@durham.ac.uk.

_____

Date   Participant Name (please print)   Participant Signature

I certify that I have presented the above information to the participant and secured his or her consent.

_____

Date   Signature of Investigator

Ethics approval

Original approval (02/11/2017)

Durham
University
School of Education

Shaped by the past, creating the future

02/11/2017

Amie Key
amie.n.key@durham.ac.uk

Dear Amie

Exploring the experiences of estranged students in UK higher education (2849)

I am pleased to inform you that your ethics application for the above research project
has been approved by the School of Education Ethics Committee.

May we take this opportunity to wish you good luck with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Nadin Beckmann
School of Education Ethics Committee Chair

Amendment approval (13/03/2018)

An amendment was made to the sample to include EU-domiciled students alongside home students.

Durham University
School of Education

Shaped by the past, creating the future

13/03/2018

Amie Key
amie.n.key@durham.ac.uk

Dear Amie,

Exploring the experiences of estranged students in UK higher education

(AMENDMENT)

Reference : 3032

I am pleased to inform you that your ethics application for the above research project has been approved by the School of Education Ethics Committee.

May we take this opportunity to wish you good luck with your research.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Nadin Beckmann
School of Education Ethics Committee Chair