"Being estranged doesn't have to stop you from doing anything": A longitudinal study exploring the experiences of estranged students in UK higher education

Artie Waterman

This thesis explores the lived experiences of students who are not in contact with or supported by their parents ('estranged'). This research is situated in a context of ubiquitous ideological views of family in British society, and in a context of widening participation research and policy that takes increasing interest in estranged students. It explores the significant moments in estranged students' day-to-day lives, and the support they draw upon when facing challenges.

To do so, I conducted a longitudinal study with ten undergraduates in England who were in the middle of their degree and identified as estranged. In-depth qualitative data was collected following their narratives through diaries and interviews from December 2020 to October 2021, capturing both term-time and holiday experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Iterative thematic analysis offered insights into how estranged students dynamically narrated their university experiences over time.

In their narratives, estranged students held non-normative views of family that extended beyond blood relations, but the social illegitimacy of these perspectives became a source of conflict. The study found that estranged students experience a diverse spectrum of challenges when navigating academics, finances, housing, and wellbeing, especially during holidays. Alongside these present difficulties, students simultaneously grappled with the impacts of their past family experiences, and a need to be looking ahead to prepare for their future survival. While every participant drew on support from their university, this support fell short and did not consider their unique needs. Estranged students responded by building supportive relationships to draw upon instead.

The findings of this research highlight the need for universities to adopt a nuanced approach that understands and supports the individual needs of each estranged student, enabling them to not only survive their studies, but to thrive throughout.

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APP Access and Participation Plan

DSA Disabled Students' Allowance

EaCES Estranged and Care Experienced students

ESRC Economic and Social Research Council

HEPI Higher Education Policy Institute

HESA Higher Education Statistics Agency

LGBTQ+ lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer *(The plus encompasses any other label that individuals may use to describe their sexuality or gender identity. I use this as an inclusive umbrella term)*

lockdown the travel restrictions enforced in response to COVID-19 *(Encompassing all UK government orders restricting non-essential travel and legally enforced quarantine for those infected with COVID-19. Began in March 2020 and lasted until after the end of this study, although the strictest rules were lifted in 2021)*

NNECL National Network for the Education of Care Leavers

NSS National Student Survey

OfS Office for Students

PA personal advisor *(A state-provided support worker for care leavers)*

the pandemic the COVID-19 pandemic *(Coronavirus Disease 2019, or SARS-2)*

PM prime minister

PTSD post-traumatic stress disorder

QL qualitative longitudinal

SFE Student Finance England *(The English subsection of SLC)*

SLC Student Loans Company

UCAS Universities and Colleges Admission Service

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PART I

RESEARCH CONTEXT

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The UK higher education sector is built on the assumption that every student is supported by their family while studying, but many like myself were not. In the first term of my undergraduate degree in 2015, I chose to cut contact with my family. This personal decision had many unanticipated impacts on my experience at university. There were significant moments of difficulty, such as being kicked out of halls when term ended and I was told to 'go home' because they needed my room for open days. Ahead of my second year, I faced difficulties in reapplying for Student Finance as I could not provide evidence of my family's income — it was here that I learnt the word 'estranged' to describe my situation. Alongside these major events, there were also recurring moments in everyday life that were challenging to navigate. I often lied about my family relationships to friends, for fear they would ask me uncomfortable questions or criticise my decision. Throughout my undergraduate study, I did not meet any student who could relate to my experiences, leaving me feeling very alone with my family situation.

The challenges that I faced as an estranged student stemmed entirely from the ubiquity of family ideology. My issue was not with the estrangement — my decision to distance from my family was empowering. Rather, the ideological and taken-for-granted significance of family in social discourse followed into higher education policies. My institution assumed by default that everyone had support from their families, placing students with experiences like mine at a deficit.

1.1   Research background and rationale

1.1.1   Personal background

My frustration with the arbitrary hurdles I had to navigate as a student motivated me to take a practical and social justice approach towards removing these structural barriers for future generations of estranged students. This began when I found out about Stand Alone, a UK-based charity who worked with people estranged from their families, and who did advocacy work calling for improvements to higher education policy. I campaigned with them on a national level, sharing my story at conferences and in the media, with the hope of raising awareness about estranged students and reducing the stigmatising 'silence' (Scharp, 2020) around estrangement. As an Education student, I used my undergraduate dissertation as an opportunity to research estrangement in higher education further, interviewing six estranged students at other universities and listening to their diverse experiential narratives about studying without family support (see Key, 2018, 2019). I then applied for and received funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for my Masters and PhD, allowing me to contribute this thesis to the field.

I continued campaigning into my Masters year, where I ran a campaign at my university raising awareness of estranged students' experiences. Through this, I finally met others whose stories resonated with mine, but were also vastly different and deeply personal. Our diverse experiences were at odds with higher education policies, which acknowledged estranged students but made blanket assumptions about the 'day-to-day struggles' (Costa et al., 2020a, p. 119) we faced, failing to consider the multifaceted personal narratives of each estranged student. These experiences shaped the approach of this study — I wanted to uncover the unheard personal narratives of estranged students over time, and explore how the taken-for-granted notion of family in higher education (and in society more broadly) shapes estranged students' experiences. My proximity to the topic of inquiry has

been a point of personal reflection throughout this research, making sure my 'insider' positionality does not cause me to lead with my own assumptions. Instead, my position as an estranged student drives an ethical approach that truly listens to and respects the personal experiences and stories of estranged students.

1.1.2   Wider contextual background

When I applied for this PhD in 2018, my proposal was a collaborative study with Stand Alone. Their early research (see Bland, 2015; Stand Alone & Centre for Family Research at University of Cambridge, 2015) had paved the way for estrangement to be included as a student characteristic within widening participation policies. Their momentum was building further as increasing numbers of universities and colleges signed their 'Stand Alone Pledge' — a public commitment to implementing support for estranged students with their transitions into university, and their finances, housing, and mental health during their studies (Mueller, 2024). However, my research collaboration with Stand Alone faltered shortly after beginning this study, as my attempts to get in touch went unanswered. As we now know, Stand Alone was experiencing issues behind the scenes and they announced the charity's closure in March 2024. As such, this thesis is situated in a time of uncertain futures for estranged students. The campaigns and services provided by Stand Alone have been adopted by different charities and student-led organisations (see Go Higher West Yorkshire, 2024), but without a main voice advocating for their needs, estranged students risk falling out of focus in policy.

Moreover, estranged students are a group that receives little research overall compared to other student characteristics under the widening participation umbrella in the UK. This field of research explores how students who do not traditionally 'fit in' to higher education may face challenges during their studies to shape policies and practices to enable 'non-traditional' students to succeed (e.g. Bowl & Bathmaker, 2016; Marshall, 2016). Academic research that focuses on the experiences of estranged students has been gradually increasing in recent years, exploring the lived experiences of students in both English (e.g. Marvell &

Child, 2023; Spacey & Sanderson, 2021) and Scottish (e.g. Costa et al., 2020a; Minty et al., 2022) contexts. Most of these studies have focused on identifying the major challenges that estranged students face as a result of their 'lack of access to familial economic, material, social or emotional support' (Stevenson & Bland, 2017, p. 3). However, much of this research adopts a lens that presumes a ubiquitous 'struggle' for estranged students. This promotes a homogenous, simplified approach that contrasts from the complex and deeply personal narratives that I heard from other estranged students through my campaigning work. As a result, being estranged continues to be a deviant and abnormal phenomenon in higher education, perpetuating the wider social stigma around family estrangement.

1.2 Research aims and questions

Drawing upon these contexts, the field of inquiry for this study is on the experiences of estranged students within the context of English higher education. When I began this PhD, I had three primary research aims in mind. First, I wanted to conduct a longitudinal study of estranged students' experiences of higher education. All of the existing research was cross-sectional, collecting data from estranged students in one period of time — there was little exploration of how their experiences changed over time or when moments of significance occurred.

Furthermore, I was interested in exploring estranged students' day-to-day university experiences. At that time, existing research was focused on the challenges that estranged students faced during significant temporal transitions — for example, how the transition into university was met with barriers to access Student Finance; or how transitions into the summer holidays came with a risk of homelessness. From this lens, their 'struggle' at major academic transitions was the focus of inquiry. However, the majority of an estranged student's experience happens outside these periods of intense upheaval, meaning that their day-to-day lives were still largely unknown. The longitudinal design aids in this exploration of diverse experience in depth, while also highlighting changes in experiences over time, and identifying moments that are

significant to the students themselves but have not yet been explored. As such, this research aimed to enable estranged students to tell a holistic story of their experiences in higher education, both good and bad, over an extended period of time in the middle of their studies.

Finally, I was eager that my study produced actionable recommendations, conducting research focused on the diversity of lived experiences that could then inform policy. Driven by my own experiences and feelings of marginalisation, it was ethically vital to not take advantage of their story and marginalise estranged students further by perpetuating the deficit lens of 'struggle'. I wanted to empower those who participated to share their stories and, together, make steps towards removing the barriers that estranged students face in higher education.

These factors informed the study's three research questions:

1) How do estranged students experience family and estrangement during their higher education studies?

2) What are the significant experiences for estranged students across the academic year and holidays?

3) What support do estranged students engage with during their studies?

A qualitative longitudinal narrative design (Neale, 2021) was used to collect in-depth insights on the experiences of estranged students who were in the middle of their degrees. Ten undergraduate students attending English universities participated in narrative interviews and wrote diary entries about their experiences in higher education between December 2020 and October 2021. Using diaries and interviews in tandem enabled the construction of a narrative about their student experiences led by what was significant to them, throughout the academic year and its holidays. Narratives were situated in their present experiences, while also rich with reflections on the past and their aspirations for the future.

1.3   Original contributions of the research

This thesis strives to provide novel insights to inform policy and practice with estranged students. To begin, this research is the first to use a longitudinal design to explore the experiences of estranged students over time. There is a growing body of qualitative longitudinal (QL) research which provides rich insights into how non-traditional students navigate their transitions in, through, and beyond higher education (e.g. Baker, 2020, 2024a; Christie et al., 2016; Jackson et al., 2005; Muñoz-Chereau & Timmis, 2019), now including estranged students. Furthermore, this study builds upon cross-sectional research with estranged students by bringing in-depth temporal insights about the significant 'turning points' and 'transitions' (Neale, 2019) in estranged students' day-to-day lives; the unique interplay between 'fixed' (academic) and 'fluid' (personal) time (Adam, 1990); and the ways that estranged students temporally engage with their present experiences, reflections on the past, and aspirations for the future.

Moreover, the narrative design of this study enabled focus on individual students' voices. The exploration of diversity between participants and within each student's experience over the year, helps to move past the simplification of estranged students' experiences through the lens of 'struggle'. One side effect of the focus on estrangement as a diverse characteristic is that this thesis often refers to 'non-estranged' students in a way that implies homogenisation. I recognise the diversity in student experiences and levels of marginalisation across the wider student population, but exploration of this in depth is outside of the scope of this particular study.

Furthermore, rather than taking the assumed passive deficit approach that estranged students 'lack' support, this study investigates the ways that estranged students were actively creating support mechanisms for themselves. It uniquely draws upon interpretivist concepts of family 'practices' (D. H. J. Morgan, 1996), 'display' (Finch, 2007), and 'families of choice' (Weeks et al., 1999) to consider the

agency of estranged students in redefining and recreating family, within and beyond their university.

An unanticipated contribution of the research project is its insights about estranged students' experiences in the socioeconomic contexts of the COVID-19 pandemic (the pandemic) and a cost-of-living crisis. The travel restrictions enforced in response to COVID-19 (lockdown) impacted all students, but the closure of university campuses and calls for students to 'return home' raises questions of how estranged students navigated the pandemic. Moreover, the rising costs of living risk further exacerbating economic inequalities faced by estranged students during their studies. This thesis provides a unique qualitative lens to complement the few existing studies conducted by charities during this period of crisis (Become et al., 2020a, 2020b; Unite Foundation et al., 2021).

More broadly, this thesis makes a theoretical contribution by exploring how estranged students are positioned not just within higher education, but in the wider interdisciplinary fields around family and estrangement. This thesis explores the role of 'family ideology' (Bernardes, 1997) and 'family discourse' (Bourdieu, 1996) in higher education policy and wider sociocultural life. Framing the experiences of estranged students this way enables consideration of how the taken-for-granted nature of family in society exacerbates, and even creates, their disadvantaged position in higher education.

1.4   Thesis outline

To conclude this introductory chapter, an outline of the thesis structure will be presented. This thesis is formed of two parts:

1) Chapters 1 to 6 address the context for this research through critical reviews of the overlapping fields of literature around family, estrangement, and higher education, and reflect on the methodological approach taken in this research.

2) Chapters 7 to 12 draw upon the theoretical and conceptual framework presented in Part 1 to address the research questions and discuss the estranged students' narratives of their experiences in higher education.

Chapters 2 and 3 considers a broader field of literature that help to understand the significance of the term 'estranged' in 'estranged student'.

Chapter 2 engages with Western theoretical conceptualisations of 'family', considering how functionalist approaches to family shape the social discourses and ideologies that privilege biological ties in contemporary British society. It considers how conflict theorisations of family, particularly poststructuralism and interpretivism, offer concepts which enable the exploration of how estranged students may redefine family in alternative ways.

Chapter 3 builds upon the macro-level theoretical approaches in Chapter 2 to explore the micro-level lived experiences of family life, and introduces significant concepts of family resources and capitals, home, and communication. The second half of the chapter engages with the interdisciplinary field of inquiry around the experiences of family estrangement, as a potential result of when these familial components breakdown between biological family members.

Chapters 4 and 5 then explore the 'student' part of the term 'estranged student' and contextualise family estrangement in higher education.

Chapter 4 situates estranged students within the research and policy contexts of English higher education and collates the available data regarding the size and characteristics of the estranged student population. The core contribution of this chapter is the discussion of how estranged students fit within widening participation contexts, exploring how estrangement can intersect with or be distinct from other widening participation student groups.

Chapter 5 addresses the most directly substantive field of inquiry that this study sits within by reviewing the literature about estranged students' lived experiences in

higher education in the UK, critically discussing what is known about the barriers that they face and the support they draw upon through their studies from academic and 'grey' literature.

Chapter 6 outlines the methodological approach, design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, and ethical considerations for this research. Throughout I reflect on my researcher positionality and the complexities of undertaking this qualitative longitudinal study.

Chapter 7 begins with introductory profiles for the ten estranged undergraduates who participated in this study. It then addresses the first research question and explores how family and estrangement were experienced by the student participants. It considers the ways that family and estrangement were not something in estranged students' pasts, but an ongoing part of their personal lives, and how this shaped their student experiences.

Chapter 8 considers the second research question and explores significant moments in the students' narratives within four experiential domains: academics, finances, housing, and holidays. This chapter focuses on the experiences that are unique to, or increasingly complex for, estranged students compared to their non-estranged student peers. The diverse ways that the participants continuously looked ahead and prepared for the future to survive, and engaged with their disadvantaged and deviant positionality in higher education, will be discussed.

Chapters 9 and 10 collectively address the third research question by considering how estranged students engage with and access support.

Chapter 9 focuses its discussion on the formal support that the students were aware of being offered by their university, and the limitations of this support. In particular, the ways that estranged students' unique needs were regularly misrecognised by their university will be explored. These shortfalls were often the result of a deficit model that takes family support for granted in higher education policies and practices.

Chapter 10 provides a novel contribution to the research in its exploration of how estranged students build supportive relationships with others within and outside higher education. This was significant to students as a means of being self-reliant away from the burdensome feelings triggered by their institution, and their desire to build a 'home' and future for themselves.

The longitudinal design of this study encouraged students to temporally engage not just with their past and present experiences, but also prospectively look ahead to the future. As such, **Chapter 11** offers an epilogue that explores how the estranged students held anticipations and hopes for their future lives post-graduation.

Finally, in **Chapter 12** I will conclude the thesis, highlighting the core findings of the study that help to answer each research question, and the contributions that this thesis brings to the existing understandings of estranged students in research, policy, and practice. I will present suggestions for further research, and recommendations for higher education institutions and national policies to improve the experiences of estranged students in UK higher education, support them to not only survive their studies, but to thrive throughout.

CHAPTER 2

CONCEPTUALISING FAMILY

To understand the ways that estranged young people experience higher education, the term 'estrangement', and 'family' more broadly, need to be considered. Estranged students do not operate in a neutral vacuum at their university, but they are positioned within a society and higher education sector that places the notion of family on a pedestal within ideological discourses. Research and policy concerning estranged students often take 'family' as a concept for granted, imposing a perspective of what is universally 'normal' despite the fact that every family is different and they all experience difficulties. This inherently frames estranged students' experiences of having no contact with their parents as 'abnormal' (Hugman, 2022). The absence of critical reflections around the term 'family' leads to a 'language trap' (Bernardes, 1997, p. 5), viewing these norms as universal common sense. This ignores complexity in the concept of family and minimises alternative perspectives, including those that may be held by estranged students themselves. Thus, the intention of this first literature review chapter is to curiously and critically explore the concept of 'family' by unpacking the varied perspectives held by Western theorists within functionalist and 'conflict' approaches to family.

It will begin by discussing the consensus perspective of functionalism that sees 'family' as a universal social grouping, source of consensus, and the foundation of society, shaping the conservative sociopolitical discourse around which kinds of family are socially legitimate. This will be followed by examining various conflict approaches which reject functionalism by considering how family can be a source of conflict and oppression, focusing on poststructuralist and interpretivist lenses. This chapter will centre on how these social and theoretical perspectives of family can

provide a lens through which to understand estranged students' lived experiences of family and higher education, including family diversity and parent-child relationships. Overall, it will argue that functionalism strongly informs the dominant social and political discourse of family in the UK and positions estrangement as deviant and illegitimate compared to traditional family relationships. It will introduce concepts from conflict approaches to enable exploration into how estranged students are able to redefine family beyond their parents in fluid and agentic ways.

2.1 Common definitions of family

To begin, it is helpful to present an overview of the shared ways that consensus and conflict approaches define family. At its core, family is a social grouping or unit where individuals form a shared network (Bernardes, 1997; Goode, 1982) and is considered permanent and enduring within Western societies (Archard, 2003). Individual membership in a family is typically determined by biological (blood) or legal (actions like marriage or adoption) relations (Hill, 2003). Some family members co-reside and share a household, usually parents and their children, while others live elsewhere and maintain their relationships through communication (Turner, 2005; Vangelisti, 2022).

Historically, theorisations of family have spoken of 'the family', viewing a nuclear family structure — a heterosexual married couple with dependent children who share a home — as *the* universal lived experience of family (e.g. Hendrix, 1975; Murdock, 1949). However, as diversified family structures (e.g. stepfamilies and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ+) families) have become more accepted in society, some theorists have shifted their language to consider 'families' (e.g. Gabb & Silva, 2011; D. H. J. Morgan, 2019).

2.2   Functionalist approaches to family

Consensus sociological theorists view family as a harmonious structure that provides unity and stability for individuals and society as a whole (Quah & Sales, 2000; Steel et al., 2012).   The core consensus perspective around family is functionalism, which views family as a social institution with 'functions' that they perform to integrate into society and maintain social order (K. R. Allen & Henderson, 2016; Lamanna, 2001). Parsons (1956) and Murdock (1949) argued that the family's primary function is to reproduce and socialise children appropriately as they grow up to assimilate into society, emphasising the importance of sustained parent-child relationships in maintaining social consensus. Moreover, Durkheim (1961) believed that an important family function is to provide and maintain a harmonious refuge in the 'home', placing significance on a private familial space for reproduction and socialisation to take place.   Functionalists believe the nuclear family is the most appropriate family structure to fulfil these functions, as it supports the development of tight-knit, intimate familial bonds (Parsons, 1956; Steel et al., 2012). The labour of performing these functions of raising children is collectively shared between family members, traditionally on gendered lines with men bringing economic stability by joining the workforce and women engaging in domestic work within the home (Murdock, 1949).   In contemporary life, where women also enter the workforce and gender diverse families have formed, the division of functions has adapted, but are still considered a necessary aspect of family life to maintain familial and social consensus by functionalists (Chambers & Gracia, 2021).

As well as performing these functions within the family, functionalists like Parsons (1956) argue that shared norms and values are key to maintaining social consensus, including a collective sense of what a 'normal family' is.   These widespread societal beliefs have been termed 'family ideology' (Bernardes, 1997): rather than describing what family *is* in practice, family ideology prescribes a vague but strongly moral and emotional image of what family *should* be, from which

individuals can compare their own experiences and fit themselves within the norm (Naldini, 2017; Oinonen, 2008). One component of family ideology that is important when considering how estranged students may view their own experiences in relation to familial norms is the symbolic value of parent-child relationships. Strong relationships between parents and their children are considered the 'bedrock' of family (Edwards & Gillies, 2012, p. 56), and powerful moral ideologies are placed on the positions of 'parenthood' and 'childhood'. Parents hold a significant burden to perform family functions, expected to support their children in their transition into society in acceptable ways with little guidance (Steel et al., 2012). 'Motherhood' is especially revered in family ideology, with mothers positioned at the core of domestic life and 'intensively' involved in raising children (Duncombe & Marsden, 1995; Ennis, 2014), while 'fatherhood' has more passive connotations as fathers are expected to economically provide for their family in the workforce (Hill, 2003). In contrast, 'childhood' is often constructed as a unique life stage of innocence and vulnerability, with children viewed as in need of protection and nurturing by their parents as they are carefully prepared for adulthood (Jenks, 1996; Wyness, 2012).

As society changes over time, so do social norms and ideals. While the nuclear family continues to hold a nostalgic strength, structural diversity such as stepfamilies or LGBTQ+ families are increasingly accepted in contemporary Western societies (K. R. Allen & Henderson, 2016), as long as it remains a socially recognisable form of family by adequately performing their familial functions.

In practice, functionalist ideals of the family are often used by politicians in neoliberal societies to link family unity to social order and blame social issues on dysfunctional families (Crossley, 2022). In the UK, several examples can be found from speeches and interviews with Conservative prime ministers (PMs): for example, Margaret Thatcher (PM from 1979-1990) labelled the family as accountable for resolving social issues, saying that the UK had a 'family structure' (Thatcher, 1987). These perspectives have carried into the 21st century, as David Cameron (PM from 2010-2016) argued that the answer to societal issues like anti-social behaviour and education 'should always begin with family' (Cameron,

2014).   In these examples, parents are given a political function as being responsible not just for their children, but for overall societal consensus (Hardacre et al., 2022). More recently, this functionalist discourse that individuals must always belong to a stable and unified family structure, even if not a nuclear family, was echoed by Rishi Sunak (PM from 2022-2024): 'whatever your family looks like, it doesn't matter as long as the common bond is love' (Sunak, 2023). The usage of family ideology in political discourse has created a dichotomy between natural and unnatural relationships, where natural biological families are seen as permanent, strong, and superior to platonic or romantic relationships which are inherently fragile (Chambers, 2012; Ganong & Coleman, 2003). Lived experiences involving rejection, distancing, or estrangement from family are positioned as 'abnormal' or 'deviant' (Boddy, 2019; Skolnick & Skolnick, 2014).   Politicians and the media problematise these experiences of family to rationalise social issues and create a 'moral panic' that the breakdown of family threatens to dismantle the consensus of society (Chambers, 2012; Naldini, 2017). Indeed, this dominance of family ideology in sociopolitical language within the UK creates barriers to equal participation in higher education for estranged students, which this thesis will explore.

2.3   Conflict approaches to family

The functionalist consensus approach to family has been criticised for being driven by a 'misfit between material realities and ideological values' (Hughey, 2016, p. 87), privileging those that conform to the norm and overlooking those with diverse structural, cultural, and micro everyday experiences of family (K. R. Allen & Henderson, 2016; Rapoport & Rapoport, 1982).   Arising in opposition to the idealised perspective of family held by functionalists, conflict theories adopt different lenses of oppression to consider the ways that family can be a potential source of harm. For example, feminist and Marxist approaches are interested in how family perpetuates social inequalities and marginalises individual family members within the 'home', which consensus theorists perceived as a safe space for personal and societal wellbeing. Feminists are particularly interested in how the

social structure of gender and its inequalities shape family life (K. R. Allen & Jaramillo-Sierra, 2015; Few-Demo & Allen, 2020) — the traditional nuclear family positioned women as 'mothers', performing a caring role for the family home and placing intense pressures on them to sustain the family (Gavron, 1966). Contemporary working mothers are expected to maintain this high standard of domestic work alongside economic careers, which feminists argue perpetuates patriarchal gender inequalities (Delphy & Leonard, 1992). Similarly, Marxism is concerned with how family perpetuates class inequalities in neoliberal societies — claiming that the social groupings of family enable capitalism by providing a safe haven for working men in the 'home', preventing larger social revolution against the bourgeoisie (Zaretsky, 1976). The ownership that men have within the family brings workplace labour struggles into the home through the gendered division of labour, echoing feminist concerns (Bernardes, 1997).

The remainder of this chapter will discuss poststructuralist and interpretivist conflict approaches to family, theories which provide helpful concepts that later enable exploration of how estranged students engage with family ideology, and how they experience family and estrangement during their studies. Poststructuralism is interested in the influence of 'public' perceptions on 'private' families, providing a lens that emphasises the socially constructed but discursively enforced nature of family and how 'family discourse' (Bourdieu, 1996) stigmatises and marginalises 'deviant' experiences like family estrangement. Interpretivism takes an agentic approach and considers how individuals can have autonomy to construct their own family through 'family practices' (D. H. J. Morgan, 1996, 2020) and 'families of choice' (Weeks et al., 1999), and the tensions between self-defining family and a need to 'display' family (Finch, 2007) with social legitimacy within family ideology.

2.3.1   Poststructuralist approaches to family

Poststructuralist approaches to family interrogate the relationship between the 'private' lived experiences of family members and the 'public' social perceptions of family (Bernardes, 1985). In opposition to the functionalist positioning of 'home' as

a separate, private and safe haven in which families can fulfil their functions, poststructuralists argue that the state uses policies shaped by family ideology to interfere with personal lives and 'homes', punishing those who deviate from societal norms (Orloff, 2005; Steel et al., 2012). Two poststructuralist theorists who provide perspectives on the family which help to understand how estranged students may navigate their 'deviant' positionality as not belonging to a socially accepted family are Michel Foucault (1977) and Pierre Bourdieu (1996, 2001).

Foucault argued that individual bodies and actions are observed through public 'gaze' to ensure that they fit social expectations, and are policed and judged when they do not (Foucault, 1977). 'Gaze' is performed by outsiders and within families, as individuals use self-surveillance strategies to try to 'fit' the external expectations placed upon them (C. Taylor, 2012). This can be a source of conflict in families, especially in parent-child relationships where parents typically have more power and autonomy than children in decision making (du Bois-Reymond, 2003). From this perspective, family estrangement and not having contact with family is 'gazed' upon with judgement, creating a social stigma which will be discussed further in Chapter 3.

Bourdieu's concepts of capital, habitus, and field[1] have been applied extensively in higher education research with non-traditional student groups, including estranged students, but he also wrote about his conceptualisations of family. Rather than taking 'family' as an assumed reality in the way that consensus scholars do, he argued that the family is simultaneously a descriptivist 'structuring structure' — an objective categorisation of how people live — and a prescriptivist 'structured structure' — a subjective, fabricated construct that enforces social stratification and control by the state (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 21). For Bourdieu, the term 'family' holds symbolic power through 'family discourse', his term for family ideology[2]. Through the sustained use of family discourse in policy and in social talk about the family, as was evident in the discourse from UK Conservative PMs, Bourdieu argues that family ideology has

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[1]These concepts will be introduced in Chapter 3.
[2]From this point on, I will use the terms 'family ideology' and 'family discourse' interchangeably throughout this thesis.

become 'ordinary discourse', or 'doxa' (Bourdieu, 2001), seen as the universal truth and reinforcing the privileged position that family holds in Western societies.

For Bourdieu, when sociopolitical discourse assumes that individuals naturally belong to supportive and united families, it means that people who are integrated with their family receive social privileges. As a result, individuals are incentivised to maintain strong family relationships to keep their privileged social status (Bourdieu, 1996). This maintenance is done through familial actions including public displays of family like sharing a surname or hosting large familial ceremonies like weddings, and through 'countless ordinary and continuous exchanges of daily existence' (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 22). However, Bourdieu notes that some of these actions reinforce and normalise social inequalities, for example gendered labour divisions in the home provide a 'legitimate representation of that division' for children (Bourdieu, 2001, p. 85). Moreover, those who do not fit within a united family lose those social privileges and are positioned as abnormal, subject to judgement and questioning of why they do not fit the 'norm' (Hugman, 2022). Thus, experiencing family estrangement marginalises individuals and leads to stigmatisation and practical barriers when living in contrast to the norms perpetuated by 'family discourse'.

2.3.2 Interpretivist approaches to family

Rather than viewing family as natural or universal, interpretivism considers how family may be constructed relationally between individuals through active interactions and familial activities. Three interpretivist concepts will be explored, each providing a helpful lens to consider how estranged students may engage with the notion of 'family': 'family practices' (D. H. J. Morgan, 1996, 2020), 'family display' (Finch, 2007), and 'families of choice' (Weeks et al., 1999; Weston, 1997).

First discussed by David D. H. J. Morgan (1996), 'family practices' are the active, fluid, and regularly occurring actions and experiences that make up the everyday lives of family. These 'practices' are routine and emotionally significant

(D. H. J. Morgan, 2020), and may include communication between family members, coordination of household routines, and spending 'quality' time together (D. H. J. Morgan, 2011). These are actions that consensus scholars would associate with their 'natural' united family, but the interpretivist perspective acknowledges how they can be performed with anyone and still be *familial* rather than being restricted to biological ties. Indeed, D. H. J. Morgan (2020) argues that by engaging with these 'practices', individuals are able to affirm, redefine, and effect 'family' for themselves.

Expanding on the concept of 'family practices', Janet Finch (2007) introduced the notion of 'family display'. As family structures have diversified, biological ties or living together do not in themselves define family. However, to be perceived and understood by others as a socially legitimate family, there is still a need to align with the values upheld in broader culture (Walsh et al., 2020). This 'display' of family is done through 'tools' which convey family in ways that are recognisable with the norm, i.e. family ideology — this is achieved with 'actions' like gift giving or sharing photographs on social media, and through 'talk' by communicating strong narratives about family to others, which is especially important during family-focused periods such as holidays (Boddy, 2019; D. H. J. Morgan, 2020; Shannon, 2022). Being perceived and accepted as family by others within and beyond the relationship is what defines it as family. While the emphasis on social recognition can theoretically allow a diverse range of relationships to be seen as family, the doxa of family in contemporary British society means relationships that deviate further from what is seen as normal may be considered a 'weak display' (Heaphy, 2011, p. 37) and fail to be legitimate.

The ability to define family through 'practices' and 'display' enables the consideration of how far family can be 'chosen'. While people cannot choose their biological relations at birth, they can make active choices throughout their life about how intimate and committed those relationships are (Keating et al., 2003). The concept of 'families of choice' was first used by Weston (1997) and Weeks et al. (1999) in their explorations of how same-sex couples formed stronger relational ties

with their friends and wider community after being rejected by their 'family of origin'. The term has continued to be applied when researching LGBTQ+ relationships, exploring how 'families of choice' reject the heteronormative norms and inequalities imposed by family ideology and redefine them with 'autonomy, mutuality, and democratic patterns of relating' (Heaphy, 2016, p. 391). It is also used by researchers exploring how young people are increasingly expanding their use of the term family to encompass all relationships which hold 'familial' qualities such as love or care (Jones-Wild, 2012; Parker & Mayock, 2019). While the term 'families of choice' has been criticised by some queer scholars for imposing the doxa of family onto LGBTQ+ relationships (Y. Taylor, 2007), the ability to reclaim a strong ideological term like 'family' and counter its assumptions can offer an act of resistance for those marginalised in society (Mizielińska, 2022).

2.4   Conclusion

This chapter explored how the sociopolitical context of family in the UK is dominated by functionalist family ideology that views biological ties as universal, permanent and morally superior (Bernardes, 1997; Chambers, 2012). This 'doxa' of family ideology (Bourdieu, 2001) is continuously reinforced by the state, manifesting as a recurring emphasis on how 'family' is responsible for social harmony by Conservative leaders, normalising this perspective as an unquestioned truth in British society. However, poststructuralists highlight that this social and political discourse results in the marginalisation of those with 'abnormal' experiences of family (Hugman, 2022), including those estranged from their biological family. As such, family ideology as a marginalising force on estranged students is one of the central themes throughout this thesis.

This chapter also explored interpretivist approaches to family, which reject functionalist ideology and embrace the varied meanings that individuals can place on family (Steel et al., 2012). The concepts of 'family practices' and 'families of choice' (D. H. J. Morgan, 1996; Weeks et al., 1999) provide a lens that will be used

to understand how the participants of this study actively and relationally reconstructed 'family' for themselves during their studies. While estranged students can find immense value in creating family for themselves, it can be difficult for these constructed families to 'display' (Finch, 2007) in a way that contemporary British society sees as legitimate.

Ultimately, family is complicated. With these macro-level perspectives of family in mind, the next chapter will explore the literature on how these family functions and practices translate into the everyday lived experiences of individuals, and how estrangement impacts family in practice.

CHAPTER 3

FAMILY LIFE AND ESTRANGEMENT

Building upon the macro-level functionalist and conflict theorisations of family discussed in Chapter 2, this chapter will delve into the literature about how family is experienced on a day-to-day basis. Functionalists view these elements as 'functions' through which harmony in the family (and society) is maintained (Murdock, 1949; Parsons, 1956), and as responsibilities which families are obligated to fulfil (Goode, 1982). In contrast, interpretivists view lived experiences as negotiable and fluid family 'practices' (D. H. J. Morgan, 1996) which, with or without biological ties, individuals may perform to 'display' familial relationships (Finch, 2007).

This chapter builds upon theoretical approaches to family, creating a conceptual framework for family life and family estrangement that will be drawn upon when analysing the participants' narratives about their experiences in higher education. Family life is a broad and multifaceted area of sociological research, so the first half of this chapter will focus on three elements which provide the most relevant concepts to understanding estranged students' experiences in this study: providing family resources; sustaining the family 'home'; and communication between family members. This chapter will explore how sociological literature addresses theoretical perspectives and the diverse lived experiences of these family functions/practices. It pays particular attention to parent-child relationships and the experiences of young people, due to its relevance when considering students who are estranged from their parents. Moreover, it will consider how these taken-for-granted functions/practices can have a 'dark side' (Steel et al., 2012), creating power imbalances or enabling conflict and abuse in families, potentially leading to relationships breaking down and individuals becoming estranged.

Following on from this picture of how family life is constructed for young people in contemporary Western societies, the second half of this chapter will interrogate the concept of family estrangement as a deviation from the normative understandings of family. Literature on theoretical conceptualisations, lived experiences, and societal perceptions of family estrangement will be critically discussed, enabling exploration of how family and estrangement were experienced in diverse, complex, and even positive ways by the participants in Chapter 7.

3.1   Family resources

One commonly discussed family responsibility or practice in the literature is the sharing of resources amongst family members. From a functionalist perspective, families are expected to provide practical and emotional support to all members, especially to children when socialising them into society (Edwards & Gillies, 2012; Parsons, 1956). In addition, interpretivists argue that offering support and sharing resources can aid in the creation and affirmation of loving and caring familial relationships (Heaphy, 2011; D. H. J. Morgan, 1996). When exploring the role that family plays in distributing resources and support to its young members, Pierre Bourdieu's theorisation of habitus, field, and capital (Bourdieu, 1977) provides a helpful lens. As explored in the poststructuralist theorisations of family in Chapter 2, Bourdieu viewed the family as holding a powerful position in society, which gives individuals 'economic, cultural and symbolic privileges' (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 23) when engaging with the wider world. Bourdieu conceptualised society as being made up of various 'fields', autonomous social spaces containing individual agents who negotiate and struggle to hold a position of power within the space (Bathmaker, 2015; Bourdieu, 1982/2019; P. Thomson, 2014). In this way, family can be considered a small-scale but significant social 'field' (Atkinson, 2014, 2020).

Within the 'family field', young children's socialisation is 'deeply formative' in the creation of their 'habitus' (Maton, 2014, p. 58). Habitus is defined as the unique 'dispositions' people have which are shaped by their personal experiences and

influences how they navigate other fields, based on if their habitus 'fits' in that field (Bourdieu, 1977). These dispositions include internalising their family experiences as 'normal' (Charles et al., 2008; Wilson et al., 2022) and internalising their feelings of 'belonging' in the family, later translating those feelings to other fields such as education or work (K.-A. Allen et al., 2022; Atkinson, 2020). Habitus is not entirely determined by childhood experiences, but is continuously 'transformed' (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 87) through their experiences in other fields, especially in educational fields (Bourdieu, 1990). As their habitus develops in the family field, young people can draw upon different forms of 'capital' as a resource that they can take into other fields (Atkinson, 2020).

Forms of capital include economic capital (monetary resources), social capital (networks and contacts), and cultural capital (knowledge and qualifications) (Andres, 2016; Bourdieu, 1984/2021). Depending on their class position in society, families may have greater or fewer types of capital ('capitals') to share amongst its members (K. R. Allen & Henderson, 2016). These material capitals become symbolic capital when they are recognised as being powerful and prestigious within a particular field (Bourdieu, 1990). In the field of higher education, students that are able to access significant economic and social capitals from their family are granted symbolic capital.

In practice, providing consistent and holistic access to support resources and capitals is a vital role and responsibility of families across the world (Israelashvili & Mozes, 2022). Most of a young child's economic, social and cultural capitals are provided by parents or other family members through 'material and social opportunities' (Valentine, 2006, p. 366), and they continue to draw upon these capitals and use family resources to support their transitions into adulthood. While in previous generations this supply of capitals ended in adulthood, the societal responsibilities placed on families have increased over time (as driven by functionalist family discourse in sociopolitical contexts), resulting in the expectation that family continues to provide for their adolescent children (Aquilino, 1997). For example, families are expected to aid with the transition into higher education or

living independently (Scharp & McLaren, 2017; Scheinfeld & Worley, 2018; Waithaka, 2014). This is particularly important given the wider socioeconomic context: rising tuition fees and a 'cost-of-living crisis' characterised by significant increases in the cost of food, housing, and fuel across the UK (Open Data Institute, 2023). Even for those adults able to sustain themselves independently, family economic and emotional capitals still hold significance as a 'safety net' for times of crisis (Finch & Mason, 1993; Swartz et al., 2011).

A consequence of these social expectations is that young people who are unable to actively draw upon resources and capitals from their family are positioned as being at a disadvantage in the higher education field. As such, the marginalisation of estranged students in higher education stems from their 'absence' of 'family capital' and their inability to draw upon family support compared to their peers (Bland, 2018; Costa et al., 2020a). While estranged students may be unable to actively draw from their family's material and social capitals during their studies, that does not mean that they have *zero* capitals. This 'absence' framing often fails to consider that estranged students come from a variety of class backgrounds and childhood family relationships, meaning they enter higher education with individually varied habituses and historically accumulated economic, social, and cultural capitals that may 'fit' into the field of higher education to different extents (Bourdieu, 1990). Moreover, the wider educational and social fields that estranged students navigate provide them with the opportunity to form supportive relationships with others who may provide them with material and social resources (capitals) during their studies. This thesis will draw upon these notions of capital when exploring the estranged student participants' narratives of their family and higher education experiences.

3.2   Family and 'home'

Another concept strongly linked to family is 'home'. Distinct from the tangible shelter of a house, 'home' is an elusive term with ideological weight attached to it (Zufferey & Horsell, 2022). Within family ideology, home is a sentimental space that

offers families comfort, safety, and belonging (K.-A. Allen et al., 2022; Kowal, 2022; Wright, 1993). Indeed, political messaging instructed people to 'stay at home' during the pandemic, moving people entirely into their home to 'be safe' (Aaslund, 2021; Quaid et al., 2022). Functionalists view the home as the place where family functions are carried out, where children are rooted (Rykwert, 1991), and where their habitus is cultivated (Bourdieu, 1996; Zufferey & Tedmanson, 2022). For interpretivists, the concept of home is fluid, shaped by individuals' relationships and personal circumstances, and can change over time (Smart, 2007; Solimene, 2022). Rather than being solely the place where family *is*, they associate home with familial practices such as providing stability and forming identity (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Steel et al., 2012).

Sociologists have also conceptualised home as a 'private sanctuary' for families (Jamieson & Cunningham-Burley, 2003; Mallett, 2004), 'separate from the public realm' (Rykwert, 1991, p. 56), within which the family field is situated, enabling its members to engage in family responsibilities and practices away from the 'gaze' of other individuals and the state (Foucault, 1977). In contemporary reality, the distinction between public and private within the home is blurred. For example, Finch (2007) discussed how families use the home as a tool to 'display' a socially acceptable family life when others are invited in, such as keeping the space clean and having familial artefacts like photographs visible. The growth of social media and video calls opens the home and family life to the public more frequently (Berriman & Jaynes, 2022), making it more challenging for families to maintain a consistently acceptable 'display'.

Home can become a multifaceted concept for young people who choose to attend university in the UK. Moving away from the family home to university is considered a rite of passage (Ellison, 2023a) for undergraduate students who are British residents (referred to in policy as home students). Even as more home students choose to study close to their family for ease of access to family support resources (Finn, 2014) or affordability (Antonucci, 2016), many choose to move into a student 'home' close to their university campus. Research with undergraduate home students has

commonly found that they conceptualise their 'student home' as a temporary space and distinguish between their 'parental home' and 'here-home' (Kenyon, 1999, p. 85) or student 'home' and family 'home home' (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005). Lived experiences of home are also fluid for young people post-graduation, as it is more common for students to 'return home' to their families when they finish their studies (Lewis et al., 2016) and to 'stay at home' for longer afterwards (Butler & Muir, 2017), enabling them to save funds and draw upon their family's economic capital in response to the rising cost of living.

Although home is commonly seen in family discourse and by theorists as a safe sanctuary, lived experiences of home do not always reflect this. Home can be a space of violence and abuse in families, with its hidden nature enabling further harm (Kurst-Swanger & Petcosky, 2003; Malloch & Rigby, 2020). Studies with victims of abuse have found how they often feel 'homeless at home' (Mallett, 2004; Zufferey, 2022) as they lack the emotive components of stability, privacy, and identity in the home that are purported by family ideology. Indeed, research with LGBTQ+ youth has explored the ways that many have to suppress their identities to stay safe in their family home, or are subject to rejection and violence after coming out, with some also experiencing homelessness (Fortier, 2001; Matthews et al., 2019; Tunåker, 2015). The challenges for young people living in unsafe homes were likely further exacerbated during lockdown, as they had no 'escape' to alternative spaces like school (Sinko et al., 2022). These difficult lived experiences can fracture the ideology of home for young people and make it challenging for them to build their own safe and secure home (Robinson, 2005), a notion that will be considered when analysing the participants' narratives about their accommodation and 'home' experiences in the second half of this thesis.

3.3   Family communication

The final element of family life to be discussed is communication, considered to be the 'core' of family life by scholars across theoretical perspectives (Vangelisti,

2022). For functionalists, communication is the means through which family functions are met, enabling parents to bond with their children and socialise them into society (Baucom & Baucom, 2022). Moreover, positive communication between family members is a function in itself, conserving harmony and intimacy in family and by extension in society (Murdock, 1949; Valentine, 2006). Interpretivists view high-quality communication as a way for intimacy between individuals in families to grow, enabling the creation and maintenance of close and trusting relationships that 'display' as familial (Finch, 2007; Jamieson & Cunningham-Burley, 2003), and facilitating positive and supportive relationships within and beyond the home (D. H. J. Morgan, 2020).

For parents and children, communication typically transitions from being parent-led towards equality as young people gain independence and transition into adulthood (Steel et al., 2012). Some studies have explored how, for young adults and their parents, quality of communication is more important for maintaining close relationships than the quantity or frequency of communication (Fang et al., 2021). Quality communication at a distance is made possible by improvements to communication technology such as social media and video calls (Hall & Woszidlo, 2022; Valentine, 2006). Maintaining close relationships with parents enables young adults to continue accessing material and social resources from their family. For example, using data from a longitudinal study following young people in the US from ages 14-32, Swartz et al. (2011) found that having a close and affectionate relationship with parents was associated with having more material support in their young adulthood. Emotional support through communication is particularly common among higher education students in the UK, as a survey with 1701 students at two northern universities in England found that 87% communicated with their family at least once a week and 51% every day, accessing support and encouragement for academic and personal stress (Bland & Stevenson, 2018).

However, family communication is also a potential source of conflict and harm in the family field (Alford, 1982; Atkinson, 2020). Conflicts between family members can stem from the inherent power hierarchies due to gender or age (Ribbens,

1994).   Power struggles between parents and children can occur when re-negotiating responsibilities or levels of autonomy in adolescence and young adulthood (Branje et al., 2022; D. H. J. Morgan, 1996). For LGBTQ+ youth, having, or fearing, their identity being rejected by their parents can be a source of power struggles and conflict (Marzetti et al., 2022; Schmitz & Tyler, 2018).   Conflict between parents and children is seen as an inevitability which can be resolved through communication (Sillars et al., 2022), but at dysfunctional extremes, communication is the means through which harm is caused with physical, verbal, and emotional abuse (Bernardes, 1997; C. M. Lee et al., 2022).   Negative communication between parents and children may lead to deteriorating relationships and family estrangement.

3.4   Family estrangement

So far, this chapter has explored how three taken-for-granted concepts of family life can be sources of struggle for individuals within a family.   The absence of supportive parent-child relationships and experiences of conflict, abuse, and homelessness counter the normative assumptions of young people's family lives, especially for those who enter higher education.   This section will explore what happens in the absence of those supportive relationships, discussing conceptualisations and lived experiences of family estrangement.   While family relationships are socially perceived as strong and permanent (Chambers, 2012), a growing field of literature has begun to explore the prevalence and experiences of people who are estranged from their family (L. Blake, 2017). The literature spans across interdisciplinary fields such as communication studies (e.g. Scharp, 2017), family therapy (e.g.   Melvin, 2024), social work (e.g.   Agllias, 2017a), and psychology (e.g. L. Blake, 2017; Conti, 2015). It captures a vast scope of different family relationships, primarily between parents and children but with growing interest in estrangement between siblings (L. Blake, Bland & Rouncefield-Swales, 2023; Hank & Steinbach, 2023) and extended family members (Sims & Rofail, 2013). Studies on parent-child estrangement are often from the perspective of the

adult child (see L. Blake, 2017, for a review), with fewer interested in parental experiences (Agllias, 2014; Gilligan et al., 2022; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2023). While noting these other important areas of inquiry in this field, this thesis will focus on the estrangement literature that aligns with the positioning of estranged students in higher education, i.e. those regarding adult children estranged from their parents.

The following sections will explore different ways that family estrangement has been conceptualised by scholars and review studies interested in the experiences of estranged people, to gain insight into the diversity of familial experiences that estranged students may have prior to and during their university studies. Moreover, the social perceptions and stereotypes associated with family estrangement will be interrogated to begin considerations of how institutions such as universities may perpetuate negative associations with family estrangement, and how estranged young people navigate these family discourses.

3.4.1   Conceptualisations of estrangement

Similarly to the complexity in understandings of family discussed in the previous chapter, the term 'estrangement' is contested without an agreed definition (L. Blake, 2017). Early conceptualisations and many contemporary scholars in fields such as family therapy view estrangement as a 'cut off' in contact between family members (Bowen, 1978; Conti, 2015). From this perspective, estrangement is triggered by a conflict that leads to the 'breakdown' (Melvin, 2024), 'disintegration' (Barcham, 2021), or 'rupture' (Coleman et al., 2022) of a family relationship. Rather than a permanent fracture, estranged family relationships can be restored through 'reconciliation' (Pillemer, 2020). From this perspective, estrangement is a binary condition where being estranged is abnormal, deviant, and ideally temporary.

Other definitions look beyond this notion of communication 'cut off' and consider a variety of family circumstances within estrangement. For example, Agllias (2017a) distinguished between 'physical' and 'emotional' estrangement — the absence of contact between family members is physical estrangement, while emotional

estrangement encompasses a diversity of strained relationships, often characterised by an absence of the familial components discussed earlier in this chapter. Rather than viewing it as a static event, others have conceptualised estrangement as a changing and ongoing 'process' (Scharp et al., 2015). Over time, relationships can fluctuate between different levels of physical and emotional estrangement (L. Blake et al., 2015; Parker & Mayock, 2019), which Agllias (2017a) called 'cyclical estrangement'. As such, these scholars view estrangement as a 'continuum' which individuals move along as their relationships change over time (Scharp & McLaren, 2017), as opposed to a strictly binary condition.

One commonality in these definitions is they are all tied to communication between family members, either as a contact binary or related to its quality. As such, a family experiencing estrangement becomes distanced from the ideal or 'normal family', due to the absence of core family responsibilities and practices discussed earlier in this chapter. Furthermore, these conceptualisations align with functionalist definitions of families structured through biological or legal ties, with estrangement as the fragmenting or removal when communication, and thus the 'family' relationship, ends. From an interpretivist perspective, where family is defined through practices and actions, estrangement has been conceptualised as 'rendered absent as a series of not doings' (Barnwell, 2024, p. 4).

However, I will argue that estrangement creates a new set of 'doings' and 'practices' as individuals actively position themselves physically and/or emotionally away from their biological family. In a hypothetical world where family could be wholly and legitimately constructed and redefined by individuals, the concept of estrangement may not even exist as biological relations became less significant for family. For as long as the concept of family presumes the ideological sanctity of blood relations, estrangement from biological family will continue to be a socially deviant and illegitimate experience.

3.4.2   Lived experiences of estrangement

The prevalence of family estrangement globally is still uncertain. The only indicative figure in the UK comes from Ipsos Mori (2014), whose survey with a representative sample of 2,082 adults found that 8% were experiencing physical estrangement from a family member. Recent findings from longitudinal surveys with representative samples in Germany and the US have enhanced awareness of its prevalence further — from 10,000 adults in Germany, 20% had experienced a period of estrangement from their father and 9% from their mother (Arránz Becker & Hank, 2022); from 8,585 adults in the US, 26% had a period of estrangement from their father and 6% from their mother (Reczek et al., 2023). These figures highlight an interesting gendered distinction in estrangement, experiences which may stem from a greater acceptance in family discourses of 'absent fathers' (Chambers, 2012; Jamieson, 1999) who may estrange themselves from their original families and create new ones. While these recent figures have started to capture the cyclical and changing nature of estrangement over time, they still only capture physical estrangements where all contact has ceased. These unknowns around the prevalence of estrangement leads some scholars to call it a 'silent epidemic' (Scharp, 2020, p. 1055).

Family estrangement does not usually happen by chance, often stemming from a historically difficult relationship with a 'last straw' moment that leads to an 'estranger' actively distancing from a family member (Agllias, 2014; Scharp et al., 2015). In a survey with 898 estranged parents and children from an online support group based in the US, Carr et al. (2015) identified three categories of reasons for estrangement between two family members: intrapersonal, intrafamilial, and interfamilial. Intrapersonal reasons are the result of characteristics of one of the involved family members, such as mental illness, addiction, or narcissism, while intrafamilial reasons include conflicts between the two family members, such as abuse or rejection of lifestyles or values. Intrapersonal and intrafamilial categories often interweave, e.g. if behaviours due to addiction cause arguments between family members (Agllias, 2016), or if a young LGBTQ+ person receives abuse from their parents after coming out (Adams, 2016; Scharp et al., 2023). These

experiences align with the 'dark side' of family life discussed earlier, and estrangement can be seen as a survival mechanism to escape an otherwise unhealthy situation (Scharp, 2014). The final category, interfamilial reasons, are the result of conflicts with two family members impacting others in the family — for example, if family members 'take sides' or get 'caught in the middle' of arguments (Agllias, 2017a; Scharp, 2020), or if contact with extended family was done through a now estranged family member (Sims & Rofail, 2013).

Estrangement 'practices'

Similarly to how family is understood by interpretivists as maintained through active 'practices' (D. H. J. Morgan, 1996), viewing estrangement as a 'process' (Scharp et al., 2015) enables exploration of the 'practices' used to maintain physical and/or emotional distance from family members. In a survey with 1,200 people estranged from at least one member of their family, Barnwell (2024) described three main categories of practices associated with maintaining estrangement: managing disclosure, checking on, and dealing with reminders. This section will discuss each in turn to enable exploration of the ways that estranged students engage in estrangement practices during their higher education studies later in this thesis.

Managing disclosure involves limiting who is aware of the estrangement, actively deciding whether to share information about their circumstances in each context (Barnwell, 2024). Earlier studies (e.g. L. Blake et al., 2015; Scharp, 2016) explored the ways that estranged people often only disclose the details of their estrangement with people they trust, such as partners or close friends. Moreover, some people may actively avoid circumstances where their estrangement becomes 'visible', such as weddings or funerals (Agllias, 2017b). The choice to not share information about family relationships may be attributed to fears of not being supported in their decision by those they disclose to (Scharp & Thomas, 2016) or feeling ashamed for not fitting normative discourses about family relationships (Melvin, 2024).

Practices of checking on relate to using social media to see how family members are doing from a distance without a need for reconciliation. The desire to check in

may stem from curiosity or concern about family wellbeing, both of which were be exacerbated for some during the pandemic (L. Blake et al., 2020). While access to information online makes it easy to check on estranged family members, for many this comes with an awareness that they were likely also being monitored by estranged family (Barnwell, 2024). As such, other studies (e.g. Agllias, 2017b; Melvin, 2024) have reported on the importance for estranged people to set personal boundaries by blocking family from certain communication channels or restricting what information they share online.

The final category is related to managing emotional reactions when a 'trigger' reminds someone of their estranged family member(s). Specific triggers vary, but those commonly mentioned in the literature include receiving unwanted contact (Linden & Sillence, 2021), being asked about family (Agllias, 2017a), or comparing a negative family situation with the happier 'displays' that others share (Barnwell, 2024). Alongside these spontaneous events, there can be recurring 'trigger dates' that bring up challenging memories and emotions for estranged individuals, such as socially family-focused periods like Christmas (L. Blake, 2017) and personal events like birthdays or anniversaries (L. Blake et al., 2015).

Emotional impacts of estrangement

Existing literature has also explored the long-term emotional impacts that family estrangement may have on individuals. The reasons for estrangement can be traumatic, but estrangement in itself can also be a distressing and traumatic experience (Dattilio & Nichols, 2011; Scharp, 2017). Estranged people may feel anger or resentment towards their biological family (Melvin, 2024) and many experience mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety (Hank, 2024). Agllias (2011) has described estrangement as an 'ambiguous loss' for estranged individuals who grieve the family relationships they had, or wished they had, but are unable to get closure on this loss when those people are still alive.

Furthermore, the literature commonly discusses feelings of isolation that estranged people experience, as the lack of open discussion creates a 'silence' around

estrangement that can make people feel alone in their situation (Scharp, 2020). Indeed, only a third of the respondents to the Ipsos Mori (2014) survey answered 'yes' when asked if they knew anyone physically estranged from their family. Moreover, some estranged people have described feeling an intense awareness of how their estrangement removes their access to their family's material and social capitals and support that others can draw upon when needed (Agllias, 2017a). This may be exacerbated for those surrounded by others who can draw upon family support (Parker & Mayock, 2019), particularly for estranged young people in higher education who are positioned at a deficit compared to their non-estranged peers. These feelings of isolation were especially intensified during the pandemic, when lockdown prevented many from accessing alternative support systems they had built, and estranged individuals had to navigate social discourses around missing and supporting family during a time of crisis (L. Blake et al., 2020).

However, not all emotional impacts of estrangement explored in the literature were negative.   Indeed, the distance that estrangement gives from shared family identities (Melvin, 2024) offers individuals an opportunity to negotiate a new self-identity, or 'differentiated self' (Agllias, 2017a) away from their difficult past. The loss of a shared family identity can be deeply challenging for some (Scharp & McLaren, 2017), but others embrace and feel empowered by their newly granted agency over themselves, especially those who hold an 'estranger' role (Linden & Sillence, 2021). Other positive impacts of estrangement include improvements in emotional wellbeing (L. Blake et al., 2015) and a sense of freedom or liberation from harmful family members (Melvin & Hickey, 2022). This acknowledgement of how estrangement can be a positive experience and a solution to otherwise difficult family relationships counters the emphasis in family ideology that estrangement is a societal 'problem' that must be 'resolved' by reuniting the broken-down family.

3.4.3   Societal perceptions of estrangement

While estrangement can be personally empowering and beneficial, it is still positioned as problematic in societies that hold biological family relationships with

significance. As discussed in the previous chapter, family ideology within Britain has mythologised and politically positioned families as responsible for the maintenance of social order, particularly placing significance on the 'durable' parent-child relationship (Jamieson, 1999; Koerner & Fitzpatrick, 2022), and family instability drives discourse around a 'moral panic' (Chambers, 2012). As such, these dominant narratives position estrangement as a 'threat' to society (Agllias, 2017a) or a 'dysfunctional' pattern that needs to be 'fixed' (J. Allen & Moore, 2017). As a hidden social experience, high-profile 'visible' estrangements are treated as a fascinating spectacle, as seen in the media portrayals of the Royal Family in recent years (see Pillemer, 2021), and individuals who experience estrangement are often portrayed as victims or deviants (Hugman, 2022).

Such social discourses and pressures for family unity creates a strong stigma around family estrangement. For example, 68% of the 807 estranged respondents in the UK to L. Blake et al.'s (2015) survey described how they felt judgement from others for contradicting social norms about family. In a similar study in with 149 adults in the US (Rittenour et al., 2018), 118 believed that there was a stereotype towards estranged adult children as being selfish and stubborn. Estranged participants in qualitative studies commonly describe feeling a continuous pressure to reconcile with their family, from people in their lives who are aware of their circumstances (e.g. Melvin & Hickey, 2022) and a pervading demand from society (e.g. Agllias, 2016; Scharp & Thomas, 2016). In periods of social crisis, these perceptions may alter — 45% of the 801 participants (from the UK, US, Canada and Australia) in L. Blake et al.'s (2020) survey shared how lockdown changed the lens of stigma around estrangement. For some, the focus on family intensified the pressure to check in and reconcile, while for others the collective experience of social distancing helped to normalise separation from family. This social pressure around estrangement may become internalised and create personal feelings of shame or embarrassment (Agllias, 2017b; Wilson et al., 2022). Indeed, many of the participants in Barnwell's (2024) survey of 1,200 estranged adults in Australia felt that the social stigma around estrangement made their situation feel even harder,

and they desired more acknowledgement and legitimation of estrangement rather than viewing reconciliation as the only 'solution'.

With this overall context of estrangement literature in mind, questions arise around what these complex lived experiences and strong societal views around family and estrangement may mean for young estranged people, especially estranged students. Young estranged people moving from childhood into adulthood are navigating new identities while forming a personal sense of self away from their previous shared family identity (Linden & Sillence, 2021; Melvin, 2024). Additionally, students are navigating a journey through higher education, a social institution shaped by family ideology in many ways that will be discussed in the next chapter. The intense pressures for any estranged adult to 'fit in' to a socially legitimate family are intensified for younger people, who draw comparisons with other students that are able to frequently draw upon family capitals, and estranged students may be met with scrutiny for not doing the same (Rittenour et al., 2018). Furthermore, younger estranged people are less likely to be able to draw upon an acceptable alternative 'family display', such as their own spouse or children. This thesis aims to gain a clearer understanding of how estranged students experience family and estrangement and how their experiences shape their higher education journeys.

3.5   Conclusion

In this chapter, the diverse ways that family is experienced on a day-to-day level have been explored to introduce a conceptual framework used throughout this thesis on family life and family estrangement. Using Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, field, and capital help to explore how families handle their responsibility to share resources within the 'family field' (Atkinson, 2014). This has led to estranged students being framed in research and policy as studying with *zero* capitals, a deficit framing that this thesis will counter by examining how estranged students draw upon other forms of formal and informal support. The concept of 'home' as an

ideological, emotional construct distinct from physical housing was introduced, considering how the significance of 'family home' for university students positions estranged students as 'abnormal'. Moreover, communication is a core component that maintains family relationships but is also a source of conflict tied strongly to the notion of estrangement.

Finally, the interdisciplinary literature that explores the contested conceptualisation and diverse lived experiences of estrangement was discussed, to understand the personal contexts that estranged students enter higher education with. It considered how family estrangement has 'practices' (Barnwell, 2024) and is actively maintained by those experiencing it. As such, estrangement is not something in estranged students' pasts but an ongoing, and even empowering, present experience during their studies. This study aims to explore how their student experiences are shaped by estrangement over time.

This chapter and Chapter 2 interrogated the 'estranged' part of the 'estranged student' label. The following chapters will consider the 'student' aspect, contextualising estranged young people within higher education policy and practice.

CHAPTER 4

POLICY AND WIDENING PARTICIPATION

So far, this thesis has explored the varied conceptualisations and complex lived experiences of family and estrangement, providing a theoretical framework to interrogate the 'estranged' in 'estranged students'. Moving on to explore the 'student' component, this chapter will set the scene of how estranged students are positioned and understood within English higher education. It will consider the positioning of estranged students as a non-traditional, widening participation student group in policy due to the barriers they face, but a group whose characteristics remain largely unknown.

This chapter will begin with an overview of English widening participation research and student funding policies in order to understand the different definitions of 'estranged' in these contexts, before interrogating the available data on the estranged student population. The key contribution of this chapter is the positioning of estrangement alongside other widening participation student characteristics — rejecting the problematic pigeonholing that the sector does by placing estranged students into a single category of disadvantage, it will explore how estranged students can diversely intersect categories, as well as the way that estrangement is distinct from other non-traditional student groups. The chapter ends by shifting the focus from how the higher education sector frames estranged students to considering the ways that students in previous studies align or distance their identities from terms like 'estranged' and navigate the stigmas surrounding this label.

4.1   Widening participation in England

Higher education policies are devolved across the UK and each nation has its own regulation and student funding system. As the focus of this research was students at English universities, this section will discuss how estranged students are positioned within the contexts of widening participation research, policy, and student funding in England.

4.1.1   Widening participation research and policy context

Widening participation policies exist within a marketised higher education system where institutions are encouraged to compete against one another to drive up standards, creating hierarchies between institutions (Archer, 2006; Fisher et al., 2016).   The English higher education system has undergone a process of massification, rapidly increasing the number of university places following the Robbins Report in 1963 (Robbins, 1963), which allowed many more students to attend. Later, the Further and Higher Education Act (1992) converted polytechnics to universities, aiming to combat the elitist binary between institutions (McCaig & Squire, 2022; Tholen, 2024).   Despite this, distinctive clusters and hierarchies between universities remain, particularly between the older research-intensive institutions of the Russell Group, and the newer post-1992 universities (Boliver, 2015). Rather than blindly increasing the number of students overall, there was a desire to make university available to a wider range of students who would not traditionally attend (P. J. Burke, 2002; Bowl & Bathmaker, 2016), driven by the New Labour agenda and their belief that higher education enabled social mobility (Boliver & Wakeling, 2020; Crawford et al., 2017).   The scope of widening participation has expanded more recently to consider the entire student lifecycle and improve not only access to higher education, but also the student experience while studying and outcomes post-graduation (Atherton et al., 2023).

Groups who are considered under the widening participation umbrella include students from areas with low higher education participation or socioeconomic

status, students from ethnic minorities, mature students, disabled students, care leavers, carers, and students estranged from their families (Office for Students, 2024b). Students under the widening participation umbrella are positioned at odds with the 'traditional' or 'ideal' higher education student (Wong & Chiu, 2021), for whom attending university is the "'natural' and taken for granted 'choice'" (Archer, 2006, p. 39). There is a well-established field of literature exploring how 'non-traditional' students navigate higher education. These students often face academic and practical challenges as a result of their background (e.g. Cotton et al., 2014; Meuleman et al., 2015), struggling to feel a sense of 'belonging', and finding it difficult to negotiate their identities within higher education (e.g. Crozier et al., 2019; Read et al., 2003). Bourdieu's theoretical framework of habitus, capital, and field (explored in the context of family in Chapter 3) is often applied to consider how these marginalised students must 'create a new habitus and find a place for themselves within HE' (Burnell, 2015, p. 96). This contrasts with those 'traditional students' whose habitus 'fits' within the higher education field (Marshall, 2016), simplifying the transition. Such research aims to raise awareness of the experiences of non-traditional students in higher education, encouraging tailored and effective support to reduce their risks of withdrawal (Boliver et al., 2020; Tinto, 1993). However, some scholars (e.g. McLellan et al., 2016; Stevenson et al., 2010; Thomas, 2006) have argued that labelling students under the widening participation umbrella as 'non-traditional' may impose a problematic deficit model onto these students, framing them as needing to be 'fixed' to fit into the 'traditional habitus' of the institution, rather than considering that the system could be changed to be inclusive by default. My research will contribute to these discussions by taking estranged students, whose family circumstances are already deemed 'deviant' in family ideology, and exploring their positioning within widening participation research and policy.

In England, higher education is monitored by the Office for Students (OfS), an independent regulator that aims to ensure all students have a 'fulfilling experience of higher education that enriches their lives and careers' (Department for Education & Office for Students, 2023, p. 6). Alongside other responsibilities like encouraging

competition between providers and protecting institutional autonomy, OfS ensures that universities follow the government's widening participation priorities, providing support for non-traditional students to access and succeed in higher education (McCaig & Squire, 2022; M. Morgan, 2012). One measure they use to regulate this is through Access and Participation Plans (APPs). To be able to charge the maximum tuition fees, higher education institutions must submit an APP every four years, outlining their planned actions and targets to increase access to, success through, and progression from higher education for the underrepresented groups they identified (Office for Students, 2024b).

Following a recent reform of APPs, universities are now encouraged to strongly link their institutional widening participation activities to the OfS' Equality of Opportunity Risk Register. This identifies twelve risk factors which impact equal opportunities to access and participation in higher education, such as lack of information and guidance, insufficient institutional support, and pressures from external factors such as costs or the pandemic (Team Wonkhe, 2023). These risks are applied to each widening participation characteristic, including estranged students (see Office for Students, 2024a), and universities are encouraged to think about how to apply their resources appropriately to support the students who are most marginalised within their unique institutional context. However, the Risk Register's focus on institutional practice discourages collaboration between universities and risks perpetuating inequalities in support packages for students across different institutions (Moores et al., 2024). Moreover, institutions may focus their resources on supporting the 'easiest' student characteristics whose needs are more familiar or require less support to succeed in higher education (Marshall, 2016), continuing to marginalise student groups who are 'newer' in widening participation discourse, such as estranged students.

4.1.2 Higher education funding context

A core way that the UK supports more students to access and succeed in higher education and reduce socioeconomic inequalities is through the provision of

financial aid from the Student Loans Company (SLC). In England, students can access funding from Student Finance England (SFE), a regional arm of SLC. Alongside a loan to cover their full tuition fee, undergraduate students are entitled to a maintenance loan[1] to assist with living costs, which is added to the balance of the tuition fee loan. This loan is repaid through salary deductions, applied like a marginal tax post-graduation (Student Loans Company, 2025b). Previously, low-income students were also eligible for non-repayable maintenance grants, but these were abolished in the 2016/17 academic year.

By default, students are considered as financially 'dependent' on their parents and the amount of funding they receive is means-tested based on two factors: their parents' income and whether they live at their family 'home' while studying. Attempting to address socioeconomic and social class inequalities in access to financial capital, students from low-income backgrounds receive a higher maintenance loan than those with a higher income. Antonucci (2016) describes this model as 'complementary', as it assumes that families provide financial support to their children and the role of the state is to make up the shortfall for lower-income families. This policy stems from functionalist perspectives of family and the state's expectation that families share their financial resources with their children, as discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Alternatively, students who fit certain criteria can apply for 'independent' student status and provide alternative evidence rather than their parents' income. Students are considered independent if they are aged 25 or over, if they have lived independently for at least three years, or if they are estranged from their family (Student Loans Company, 2025b). In these cases, evidence of their own income or independent circumstances is required to access funding, rather than evidence of their parents' income. As financial dependence on parents is considered the 'norm' in higher education, independent students fall under the widening participation umbrella.

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[1]In the 2025/26 academic year, the maximum maintenance loan is £10,544 for students studying outside of London, and £13,762 for students in London.

While the financial provision from SLC is a tool designed to widen participation in higher education by allocating funds to those who need them most, there are limitations in how far these funds are fit for purpose and provide adequate financial support for non-traditional students in reality. Particularly in the context of the pandemic and a cost-of-living crisis, concerns have arisen that the maintenance loan does not account for unexpected or increased costs and leave already financially vulnerable students at risk. For example, in a survey with 1786 students conducted by Save the Student (see L. Brown, 2023), maintenance loans fell short of living costs by £582 on average, a gap that had grown by over £200 since their 2021 survey. Rather than reducing socioeconomic inequalities, these shortfalls disproportionately impact non-traditional students as many choose to take up part-time employment during their studies to cover those costs, impacting their ability to fully engage with the traditional on-campus student experience (All-Party Parliamentary Group for Students, 2023). This thesis aims to explore the ways that estranged students navigated higher education within these socioeconomic and student funding contexts.

4.2   Defining 'estrangement' in higher education

In Chapter 3, the conceptual complexity around what constitutes family estrangement was introduced, including physical, emotional, and cyclical estrangement (Agllias, 2017a). Such complexity is echoed within the higher education sector, as different definitions for 'estrangement' are used across research, policy and student-facing organisations. This section will critically discuss how these varied definitions may create confusion or even exclude estranged students from being identified and receiving support during their studies.

4.2.1   Definitions of 'estrangement' from funding contexts

The primary definition used to describe estrangement in higher education stems from student funding contexts. As just explored, students who apply for statutory financial support are either categorised as financially dependent or independent on their parents, where one category of independent students are those 'estranged' from their families. SFE considers estranged students to be those under the age of 25 who are 'irreconcilably estranged' from both of their parents, meaning they have no verbal or written contact with them, and that this is unlikely to change (Student Finance England, 2023). Historically, students needed to have no contact for at least 12 months to be considered as financially independent (this is now reviewed on a case-by-case basis), and students are only given funding if SFE believes that their family situation is unlikely to change. To 'prove' their estrangement status and receive the maximum maintenance loan, students have to provide evidence from a reputable third party, such as a doctor, teacher or social worker (Student Loans Company, 2025b). Although this 'formal' definition of estrangement originates from funding contexts, universities often implement this definition as eligibility criteria for student support mechanisms designed for estranged students (Spacey & Sanderson, 2022). It has also been used in some research studies on estranged students' experiences when using Student Finance databases to recruit participants (e.g. Bland, 2018; Bland & Blake, 2020).

This 'formal' definition has a number of limitations. Firstly, the need for students to be 'irreconcilably estranged' from both parents is tied to an extreme, binary perspective of estrangement, ignoring developments in research explored in Chapter 3 which identified estrangement as an ongoing 'process' that moves along a 'continuum' (Scharp et al., 2015; Scharp & McLaren, 2017). It excludes a diversity of estrangement experiences where students may still face barriers to accessing financial and other resources from their family, such as being estranged from one parent, experiencing cyclical estrangement by fluctuating between contact and no contact over time, and emotional estrangements where students have a

challenging relationship with family but are unable to 'cut contact' (Agllias, 2017a; L. Blake et al., 2015).

Moreover, if this definition is used by institutions to identify their estranged student population and deliver support mechanisms, a number of seemingly arbitrary restrictions are enforced that can disadvantage students with intersecting characteristics. For example, SFE does not claim that students aged 25 or over *cannot* be estranged — rather that those students are automatically considered independent by virtue of being 'mature' students, so they do not need to 'prove' estrangement to receive funding (Student Loans Company, 2023). As such, 'estranged' according to SFE is really 'independent by virtue of estrangement'. When universities rely on this as a definition of estrangement, it causes challenges for mature estranged students who are excluded from estranged student support mechanisms. Similar challenges in being identified as 'estranged' may also be faced by other students who do not access Student Finance for various reasons, such as international students, self-funded students, and those who have received funding in the past for a different degree. As institutions are encouraged to identify their estranged students using the data they receive from SLC (see Office for Students, 2020a), estranged students who fit multiple categorisations risk falling through the gaps in support. These intersectional components will be explored further later in the chapter.

4.2.2   Moving towards an inclusive definition of 'estrangement'

Acknowledging the limitations of the 'formal' definition, other organisations in the higher education sector have begun to shift towards a definition which is more inclusive of a range of student characteristics and estrangement experiences. Universities and Colleges Admission Service (UCAS), the company that hosts the main university application route for home students, have allowed prospective students to self-identify as estranged in their application form since 2023 under the following definition:

> *An estranged person is someone who no longer has the support of their parents, and often also other family members, due to a permanent breakdown in their relationship which has led to ceased contact. This might mean your biological, step or adoptive parents or wider family members who have been responsible for supporting you in the past* (UCAS, 2023)

This definition distances from the arbitrary financial restrictions around age or previous funding status, and accounts for varied family structures of support rather than being tied to biological parents. However, there is an unfortunate continuation of conceptualising estrangement as a 'permanent breakdown' or cut-off in contact (Conti, 2015; Melvin, 2024) and a lack of engagement with the diversity of estrangement circumstances that applicants may have experienced.

In contrast, charities and other organisations who work directly with estranged people in the higher education sector have broader definitions that distance even further from those used by SFE or UCAS. Before their closure in 2024, the charity *Stand Alone*[2] provided support to those 'studying without the support and approval of a family network' more broadly (Spacey, 2020, p. 2). Student-led advocacy movements such as Estranged and Care Experienced students (EaCES) (2024) and the All of Us community (funded by charity Unite Foundation, n.d.) choose not to define 'estrangement', instead using inclusive messaging that their work is in support of any student who 'self-identifies' as estranged from their family. Recent qualitative studies have followed this approach to recruit based on self-identification of estrangement status, or characteristics like not having contact or support from family, enabling the exploration of a broader range of estranged student experiences (e.g. Key, 2018; Marvell & Child, 2023). One limitation of fully implementing these inclusive definitions is that it would create practical challenges when supporting estranged students, such as for universities with limited material resources and a desire to focus on those who need the most support. However, appropriate movements towards inclusive self-definition in the wider higher education sector would be a positive step to acknowledge the complex and

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[2]See Chapter 1 for a summary of Stand Alone's work.

multifaceted estrangement experiences that students can have, and to reduce the burden of 'proof' currently placed on estranged students.

4.2.3 The implications of conceptual complexity

The use of different definitions of estrangement within higher education has resulted in a complex landscape. Institutions receive estranged student lists from both Student Finance and UCAS, but their different approaches to defining and identifying estranged students mean they are disjointed and may contradict each other. Anecdotal reports from support staff at universities during Stand Alone events I attended in 2018-2019 highlighted a consistent difficulty in practice around how universities should define and identify estranged students in order to support them. These are echoed in recent findings described by Bhattacharya and Payne (2024) about how universities have struggled to identify and track care experienced students even when they are identified by UCAS or Student Finance. The complexity here leads to some universities using inconsistent criteria and definitions for their support, for example aligning with Student Finance when providing monetary support with financial or housing issues, and more inclusive definitions for informal peer support (Sanderson & Spacey, 2021).

This complexity then has implications for estranged students themselves. Throughout the student journey they will encounter contradictory definitions of 'estrangement' from SFE, UCAS, and their university, possibly leading to confusion of whether their personal family circumstances entitle them to any support. The risk of exclusion is further compounded when the onus to disclose their estrangement is placed on the student, where the social stigma around family estrangement makes this more challenging (Agllias, 2017a, and discussed further in Chapter 5). The result of conflicting and restrictive definitions means that estranged students 'remain largely unidentified and invisible' (Bland, 2018, p. 69) within UK higher education.

The first step towards making the diverse experiences of estranged students 'visible' is to look beyond the restrictive definitions in research. Throughout this thesis, I align with a broader definition of estrangement which is inclusive of students who have lived experience of strained familial relationships and have limited contact and/or support with their parents and/or wider family while studying. This is regardless of whether they have disclosed to SFE, UCAS or their institution. An inclusive approach to estrangement enables the exploration of the experiences of estranged students who have previously been excluded by formal categorisation and subsequently fall through the gaps when trying to access formal support.

4.3   Mapping the estranged student population

Compared to other widening participation student categories, there is limited data to provide a coherent overview of what the estranged student population looks like. This section will collate the population data that currently exists about estranged student numbers, characteristics, experiences, and outcomes, in order to critically discuss the gaps in the higher education sector's knowledge of estranged students. Indeed, this data should not be considered representative of the entire estranged student population, as the majority comes from sources aligning with the formal definition, and data is skewed towards those who have been recognised as estranged by SFE. However, it provides insights which will act as a springboard to discuss the diverse experiences within the estranged student population throughout this thesis.

4.3.1   Data on estrangement prevalence in higher education

Despite the social 'silence' that surrounds family estrangement (Scharp, 2020), it directly impacts 8% of people from all ages in the UK (Ipsos Mori, 2014). Estimations from Buttle UK (2022) using youth homelessness and student data suggest that around 150,000 16 to 20-year-olds are estranged from their families, around 4% of the population of this age group (Statistica, 2024).   While these estimations around prevalence have limitations, we can assume that estrangement will impact some students in higher education. Our first insight into the prevalence of family estrangement within the student population came from a freedom of information request to SLC by Stand Alone (2019), which found that 8,080 undergraduate students had been granted independent 'estrangement' status in England, Wales, and Northern Ireland in the 2017/18 academic year, approximately 0.5% of the undergraduate student population. SLC has since begun publishing these figures with national and institutional breakdowns each year — as of March 2025, the most recent figures show 10,902 estranged undergraduate students studying in England in the 2023/2024 academic year, and the provisional number of estranged students for the 2024/2025 academic year is 9,115 (Student Loans Company, 2025a).   However, the limitations previously identified with SFE's definition of estrangement apply to this figure, as it only captures those who applied for and successfully received independent status under the 'estrangement' bracket. It is likely that there are many more estranged students studying at English higher education institutions in reality.

While our sense of scale about the estranged student population has historically been limited to this figure from SLC, other data is becoming available over time. As of 2024, UCAS publishes figures on how many applicants ticked the estrangement identification box on their university applications, with their most recent publication showing that 11,600 people who self-identified as estranged were accepted into university in 2024 (UCAS, 2025). It is necessary to highlight the difference between these figures — using UCAS' broader self-identification method, there are 11,600 estranged students *in one year*, which is more than the 10,902 estranged students

SLC identified *across all years* of undergraduate study. The UCAS figure is not perfect: it does not count students who apply to study through other routes, and there is no verification that students who tick the box actually fit their definition. Despite this, the disparity between the two statistics is clear evidence that many estranged students have fallen through the gaps in identification, and as a result may have missed out on support during their studies.

4.3.2 Data on estranged students' characteristics

As knowledge on the number of estranged students in higher education has increased, so has understanding about some common characteristics, namely study locations and estrangement circumstances. This section primarily draws upon data published by SLC (2025a), and early data reported on by Stand Alone (Stand Alone & Centre for Family Research at University of Cambridge, 2015; Unite Foundation & Stand Alone, 2015). Once again, the discussed figures are limited to those who fit the 'formal' financial definition of estrangement and do not capture all estranged students.

One characteristic of estranged students tracked by SLC is the distribution of estranged students across higher education institutions. While there are estranged students attending almost all higher education institutions in England (Student Loans Company, 2025a), there are some universities where estranged student numbers are higher. From the data provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and SLC, Unite Foundation and Stand Alone (2015) reported that most estranged students studied in large cities and urban areas — 59.7% of students studied at institutions in London, with other common areas including Birmingham (8.45%), Manchester (8.26%) and Liverpool (5%) — and were more likely to be studying at a newer institution than at prestigious Russell Group universities. This is echoed by recent data which shows that the institutions most commonly attended by estranged students in 2023/2024 were post-1992 universities in Manchester, Nottingham, Birmingham, and Sheffield (Student Loans Company, 2025a). These trends may be influenced by large cities hosting more

opportunities for part-time work and options for affordable accommodation, assisting with the practical challenges of affording university without parental support, which will be explored further in the next chapter. Furthermore, estranged students may prefer to study at newer universities if they worry they would not 'fit in' at academically prestigious environments as a non-traditional student (Stevenson et al., 2020). This mirrors research with working-class students about how they negotiate their positionality of 'other' in higher education through major identity work or choosing to attend institutions that align closer to their 'habitus' (Read et al., 2003; Reay et al., 2010).

In contrast, one characteristic which is less systematically reported on, available from studies on those who fit the 'formal' definition, relates to common family and estrangement circumstances. For example, Bland (2015) conducted a survey with 584 estranged students (94% of whom studied in England) and found that 79% of the students became estranged at age 18 or under, often before or early in their university studies. As such, it is likely that estranged students enter higher education with experiences of difficult family circumstances or trauma in their childhood, which may influence both their academic trajectories and their mental health while studying (Dattilio & Nichols, 2011; Marvell & Child, 2023). Indeed, in a larger survey of 807 recipients of support from Stand Alone, the 84 student respondents commonly cited emotional abuse, mismatched expectations from family, and clashes in personal values with family as the reasons for their estrangement (Stand Alone & Centre for Family Research at University of Cambridge, 2015).

Overall, there is still very little understanding of common characteristics in the estranged student population other than their location. Despite the diverse forms of family estrangement explored in Chapter 3, there has been little exploration since these early Stand Alone surveys into the personal familial backgrounds of estranged students entering higher education. This, as well as the emphasis on an extreme binary experience enforced by SFE's definition, risks making crude assumptions about how estranged students engage with and perceive their families, and the impacts this may have during their studies. Furthermore, data on

estranged students' intersections with other non-traditional student categories is near-absent, with little understanding about how estrangement may intersect with gender, race, disability, or sexuality and gender identity.

4.3.3   Data on estranged students' experiences and outcomes

There is an increasing demand for data to be systematically collected on students' experiences and outcomes to inform student choice and drive competition in a marketised higher education system (Roksa & Robinson, 2016), and these measures can provide some insight regarding estranged students. Calls for the major student experience surveys to add estrangement status (e.g. K. Brown & Rawls, 2024; Ellison, 2022) have recently been met: estrangement was added as a student characteristic to the National Student Survey (NSS) in 2023, and to the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) Student Academic Survey in 2024 (Neves et al., 2024). This means that trends over time in estranged students' experiences and perspectives within the domains of teaching, learning, assessment, finances, emotional wellbeing, belonging and support will become available in the coming years. While HEPI's Student Academic Survey adopted a self-identification metric for estranged students, the NSS only identifies estranged students based on their 'formal' estrangement status (Office for Students, 2023a), continuing trends that datasets only capture a subsection of the population. The currently available quantitative and qualitative data around estranged students' experiences in higher education will be explored in Chapter 5.

Additionally, data on estranged students' outcomes in higher education from recent academic years has been consolidated by the Office for Students (n.d.). Figure 4.1 on the following page highlights select findings from their data that highlight how estranged students have lower outcomes across the student lifecycle than their non-estranged peers. These figures are indicative of how estranged students face a number of challenges throughout all stages of their higher education studies that may increase their risks of withdrawal (Bland, 2018; Tinto, 1993). One core aim of this longitudinal research project is to build upon these findings and identify
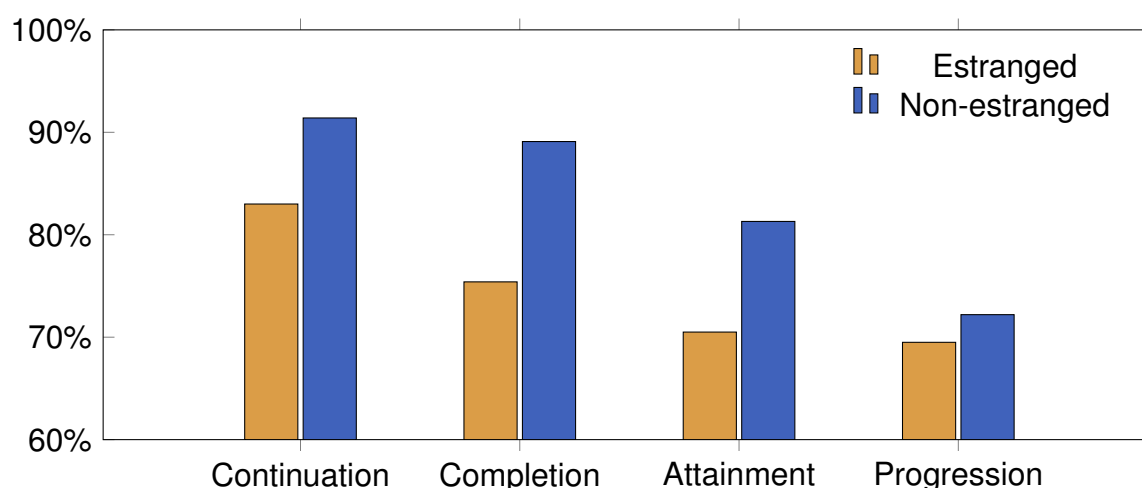
Figure 4.1: Comparison of academic outcomes between estranged and non-estranged students in the UK. *Continuation* and *Completion* statistics represent students who entered during the 2018/19 academic year. *Attainment* and *Progression* statistics represent students who qualified in the 2021/22 academic year. This attempts to follow the same cohort, assuming a three-year degree. Data from Office for Students (n.d.)

significant temporal moments faced by the estranged participants during their studies, which can help to inform improvements to support mechanisms across their student journey.

From the available data, the OfS have identified estranged students as experiencing seven out of the twelve risk factors in higher education in their Equality of Opportunity Risk Register: lack of information and guidance about higher education, insufficient academic support, insufficient personal support, mental health, cost pressures, capacity issues, and progression from higher education (Office for Students, 2024a). However, charities who work with care leavers and estranged students have argued that estranged students should additionally be considered as at risk of three further factors, totalling ten of the twelve: lack of knowledge and skills to be accepted into higher education, perceiving higher education as inaccessible to them, and lower application success rates (see Care Leaver Covenant et al., 2023). This is suggestive of a gap in the official data that excludes much of the estranged student population, and that the impacts of family estrangement on student experiences continue to be

underestimated across the higher education sector, likely due to the enduring strength of family ideology and the taken-for-granted notion of family support.

To summarise, while population data on the prevalence, characteristics, experiences and outcomes of estranged students is increasing over time, there are still major knowledge gaps. This is especially pertinent for estranged students who do not fit the 'formal' definition required to receive funds from SFE. There is also an absence of longitudinal analysis of existing data on estranged students at present. Accordingly, many estranged students in higher education are rendered invisible in the existing data, highlighting a need for inclusive definitions and for the diversity of estranged students' voices to be heard in research moving forward.

4.4   Intersections with other student categories

So far, this chapter has discussed how estranged students are defined as a widening participation group in English higher education and collated the limited data that is currently available about this student population. A core issue with the existing widening participation framework is that estranged students are placed within a single category of 'disadvantage' where their independent student funding status is privileged over other marginalised characteristics they may hold. In fact, students entering higher education are multifaceted humans who may experience inequalities as a result of their race, age, sexuality, gender, socioeconomic status, or other personal contexts and backgrounds. There is a strong need for the sector to holistically consider each student's individual contexts and allow them to hold multiple 'non-traditional' categorisations at once, in order to understand and address the ways that intersecting characteristics create unique forms of inequalities in higher education.

To begin this exploration, the intersections of estrangement with care experience, age, and LGBTQ+ identity will now be explored. This should not be seen as an exhaustive list: a handful of coinciding characteristics were identified by Unite Foundation and Stand Alone (2015) (see Figure 4.2 on the next page), and

individual estranged students may also hold any other widening participation or non-traditional student category. These three aspects specifically were selected for discussion as they reflect some of the characteristics held by participants of this study[3]. The goal of this section is to justify the need for higher education to more appropriately identify students intersecting multiple marginalised categories, to better understand the diverse experiences and needs of widening participation populations broadly, and particularly to move past the homogenous approach currently taken when discussing estranged students.
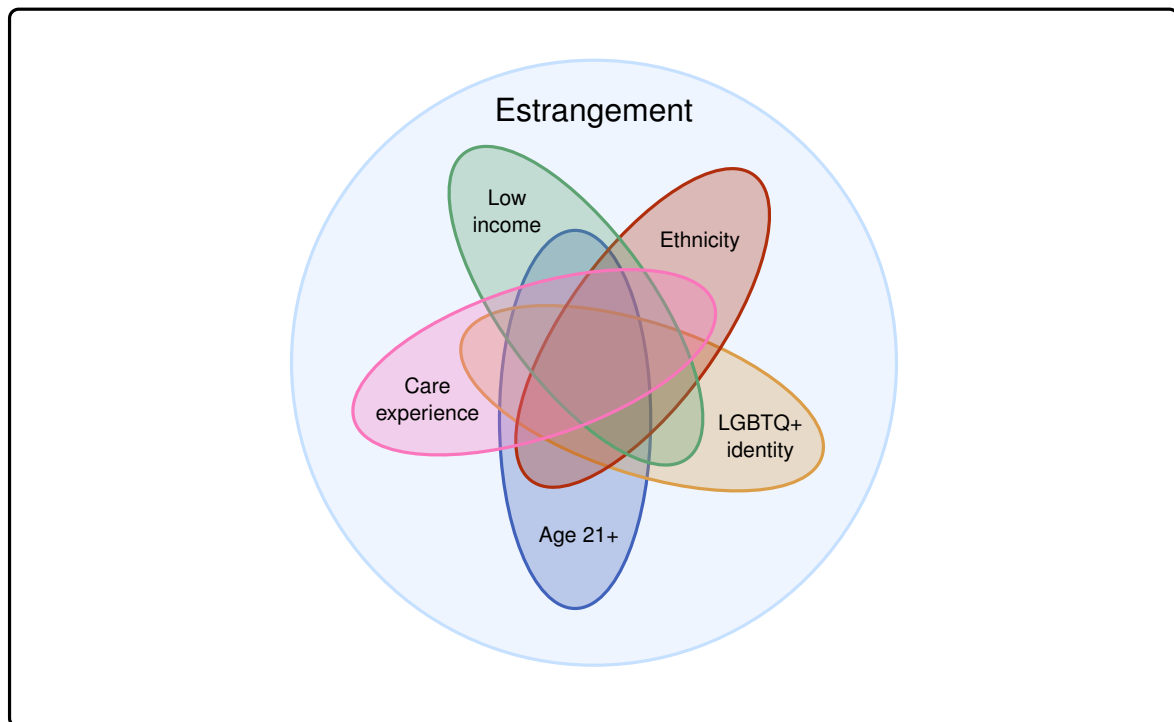
Figure 4.2: Non-traditional student characteristics that may intersect for estranged students, as identified by Unite Foundation and Stand Alone (2015)

4.4.1 Intersections with care experienced students

The most frequently acknowledged widening participation characteristic that intersects with estrangement for students is experience in the care system. In the same way that there are 'formal' and more inclusive definitions used for estrangement in higher education, there are different terms used for people with

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[3]A summary of the participant characteristics and individual profiles for each student who participated in this study are available in Chapter 7.

care experience. Care leavers are legally defined as young people who have been in formal care for at least 13 weeks before the age of 16, and those who fit this definition are entitled to support from their local authority until the age of 25 (Bhattacharya & Payne, 2024; Simpson & Murphy, 2022). In contrast, the term 'care experienced' takes a broader approach and is inclusive of those who have had any experience of care (N. Harrison et al., 2021). The use of this latter term is encouraged by the Office for Students (2022) due to the similar support needs of those who have experience of care but are excluded from the legal definition, mirroring the rationale behind the adoption and advocacy of more inclusive definitions of estrangement.

There is growing research on the prevalence and experiences of care-experienced students in higher education. N. Harrison (2020) identified that while official government figures show only 6% of care leavers entering higher education in the UK, when accounting for the inclusive definition of care experience, up to 25% of care experienced people in the UK participate in higher education during their lives. Experiential studies have identified common practical challenges that care experienced students face with learning, finances, and housing, often attributed to the absence of family capitals or 'safety net' (Cotton et al., 2014; Jackson et al., 2005; Hauari et al., 2019). Moreover, their past experiences in the care system may lead to traumas that impact on their studies, such as feeling isolated in higher education (e.g. N. Harrison et al., 2021; Simpson & Murphy, 2022) or feeling their care experience is stigmatised in society, similar to estrangement (e.g. Ellis & Johnston, 2024). This research has called for improved support for care experienced people with their transitions into, through, and beyond higher education, particularly for those who do not have legal 'care leaver' status and therefore face greater gaps in support (e.g. Baker, 2024a; N. Harrison et al., 2021; Pinkney & Walker, 2020). Chapter 5 will explore the experiential similarities in higher education between care experienced and estranged students further.

In practice, estranged and care experienced students are commonly grouped together in higher education support initiatives. For example, universities may

group them together under an EaCES support programme (e.g. at Durham University, n.d.), and student-led networks take a similar approach (e.g. EaCES, 2024). A number of recent student experience research studies have explored estranged and care experienced students' experiences in tandem (e.g. Marvell & Child, 2023; Spacey & Sanderson, 2021; Stevenson et al., 2020). However, there is a risk that when grouping these students together, estranged students still sit on the margins of support considerations and academic research due to their newer status in widening participation discourse compared to care leavers and care experienced students. It is important to not homogenise this group and assume that all estranged students are care experienced, or vice versa. In Bland's (2015) survey with 584 undergraduate students with formal estrangement status, 76% had not been in care and 59% had no contact with social services during childhood. Moreover, not all care experienced people experience family estrangement during their studies and may maintain relationships with, and access practical and/or emotional from, their biological and/or foster families (e.g. Bhattacharya & Payne, 2024; Hauari et al., 2019). These important distinctions are little acknowledged in the higher education sector, risking the minimisation of each group's unique experiences.

4.4.2 Intersections with mature students

Another common widening participation characteristic that intersects with estrangement is age, with older students known in the higher education sector as 'mature' students. While Student Finance considers a student financially mature and independent from the age of 25, other bodies such as OfS and UCAS define mature students as those who begin their undergraduate studies at age 21 or older. Experiential academic research has found a range of challenges mature students face when navigating higher education (e.g. Gregersen & Nielsen, 2023; Muñoz-Chereau & Timmis, 2019). For example, mature students often report feeling isolated or alienated in their university and from their younger peers, impacting their sense of belonging (e.g. Mallman & Lee, 2017; Read et al., 2003). Academically, mature students may feel anxious and have lower confidence due to

their gaps in learning (e.g. Busher et al., 2015), and struggle to manage their studies alongside their personal responsibilities, especially those who are also parents (e.g. Hayman et al., 2024; Reay, 2002). Stevenson and Clegg (2013) argued that mature students also differ from 'traditional' students in how they narrate their experiences of higher education, in that they actively aim to create a better future for themselves through education despite the challenges they face in the present.

These challenges and the varied definitions of mature students in higher education complicate the picture when intersecting with estrangement. As estrangement definitions orientate around 'young people', estranged students over the age of 25 are excluded when discussing the population and the support mechanisms that could enable them to succeed at their institution. This is particularly exacerbated by the common perception that mature students are heavily situated within their family 'field' outside of higher education (O'Boyle, 2015). In contrast, students between 21 and 24 years old are able to apply for 'formal' estrangement status and make up a large proportion of those who receive it: reporting on HESA and SLC data from the 2014/15 academic year, (Unite Foundation & Stand Alone, 2015) found that 52% of students with formal estrangement status were 21-24. Moreover, in their analysis of the HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey results, Bhattacharya and Payne (2024) found that around half of the UK-based care experienced and estranged students who responded to the survey were over 25. This significant overlap between estrangement and mature identities may be attributed to how some estranged students take slower or non-traditional routes into higher education if their earlier education or young life was disrupted by family estrangement (Stevenson et al., 2020). However, if universities prioritise categorising their students by age, even 'formally' identified estranged students may be excluded from support mechanisms. While some qualitative research studies have large numbers of mature students in their sample (e.g. Costa et al., 2020a; Spacey & Sanderson, 2021), there has not been any research that specifically explores mature estranged students and the unique inequalities they face in higher education.

4.4.3   Intersections with LGBTQ+ students

The final intersection to be discussed regards estranged students with LGBTQ+ identities. As discussed in Chapter 2, the concept of 'families of choice' is often applied to those who have been rejected by their biological families as a result of their sexuality or gender identity, and their creation of strong family-like ties with peers (Heaphy, 2016; Weeks et al., 1999). While social attitudes towards LGBTQ+ rights have steadily become more accepting in the UK (see Huchet-Bodet et al., 2019), there is a sense in contemporary British society that hateful perspectives towards the LGBTQ+ community are socially and discursively legitimised, particularly around trans and gender diverse people (Todd, 2020). This has resulted in many young LGBTQ+ people experiencing rejection or increasingly fearing rejection from their families (e.g. Freeman & Stephenson, 2024). Thus, estrangement is likely to be more prominent for LGBTQ+ people than the wider population: in their survey of 1,736 LGBTQ+ 18-25-year-olds in the UK, charity Just Like Us (2023) found that 46% were estranged from at least one family member, and 5% were estranged from their entire family.

Interestingly, the first discussions of estrangement within higher education came from concerns about the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in higher education, from a survey of 30 students in the UK by NUS (2008). This survey identified an association between estrangement and being LGBTQ+ and identified barriers that they faced when trying to evidence their estrangement when accessing Student Finance support. Building upon this foundation, Unite Foundation and Stand Alone (2015) found that family rejection based on sexuality or gender identity was a common reason for estrangement cited by the 275 respondents, and more recent studies with estranged students have had LGBTQ+ participants (e.g. Costa et al., 2020a; Marvell & Child, 2023; Minty et al., 2022). While the intersection between LGBTQ+ and estrangement circumstances is widely acknowledged in the sector, there has been little exploration of how LGBTQ+ estranged students may have exacerbated challenges within higher education.

4.5 Distinctions between estrangement and other student categories

As estranged students are still an under-researched population in higher education, their positionality in the widening participation context broadly has not yet been fully explored. In this section, I will reflect on two unique aspects of estrangement compared to other widening participation categories — that estrangement can impact any student during their studies, and that estranged students can have different levels of access to family resources. I will consider the impact of those aspects on estranged students navigating these labels during their studies.

One factor that makes family estrangement unique from other widening participation categories is how it is tied to an experience that can impact students from any background and occur during their studies. Marvell and Child (2023) discussed how there is an expectation that an 'ideal student' comes into university with their studies as their priority, able to focus on it exclusively with no external challenges. Many non-traditional student categorisations are tied to relatively static parts of a person's identity or history that they bring with them, such as age, ethnicity, care experience, or socioeconomic background. These elements shape how they navigate and experience higher education, but do not necessarily change during their studies. In contrast, estrangement may be experienced by anybody at any time, including those who are otherwise an 'ideal student', and the active 'practices' used to maintain estrangement (Barnwell, 2024) will add external challenges which may create inequalities for students. Indeed, in their guidance to universities about estranged students, Office for Students (2020c) note that estrangement is an underrepresented experience that students are at risk of during their studies and encourage universities to account for these personal changes in their support measures, but the continued reliance on SLC data to identify estranged students means that those who experience estrangement during their studies may not be identified and supported. Estrangement is not entirely unique within widening participation categories in this regard: for example, students may

develop new disabilities or have added caring responsibilities during their studies. However, it raises an important point about an under-explored dynamic in how students' external life circumstances may change during their studies and run the risk of falling through the gaps for support, especially when this identification is often tied to slow and challenging processes like Student Finance status.

Another key distinction between estranged students and other non-traditional student groups is differences in access to resources from family. As explored in Chapter 3, access to financial, social, and cultural capital and resources is considered a core part of family life, particularly for young people navigating the transition to adulthood (Scheinfeld & Worley, 2018); and technology plays an important role to facilitate communication with family at a distance, enabling university students to regularly access support (Bland & Stevenson, 2018). Recent studies with non-traditional students have highlighted the importance of family support, especially emotional support, when navigating the unfamiliar field of higher education (e.g. Azaola, 2020; Bathmaker et al., 2016; Raaper et al., 2022). Therefore, Costa et al. (2020a) argue that estranged students' inability to seek guidance and support from their family places them at a major disadvantage. However, while this is a unique position for estranged students in higher education, it is important that this claim of disadvantage does not fall into a deficit model. Current perspectives assume that having no family support or 'capital' means having no support at all, aligning with approaches to family that view family estrangement as problematic and socially 'deviant'. The findings from this thesis will explore how, in reality, estranged students draw capitals and resources from a wide range of sources of support such as peers, partners, and extended family.

4.6   Student alignment with the term 'estranged'

This chapter has examined how estranged students are perceived within the higher education sector as a non-traditional, disadvantaged student group within widening participation research and policy. Across its varied definitions, family estrangement

is conceptualised as an experience that results in the student losing access to capitals and resources from the family: SFE positions estranged students as unable to access financial capital, while inclusive definitions also consider the loss of social and emotional capitals. As a result, the challenges faced by estranged students in their studies echo the discourse used in care leavers literature, framing them as the result of their '*lack* of social and economic capitals' from family (Costa et al., 2020b, p. 869, my emphasis).

I believe these narratives constructed by and imposed upon estranged students by the higher education sector create a 'deficit discourse' (Marvell & Child, 2023, p. 100), marginalising estranged students' own perspectives of their estrangement and student experiences. Rather than assuming a homogenous group of students whose identities are associated with 'struggle', as is done in existing literature, it is vital to uplift and hear the diverse perspectives that estranged students have, to better understand and reduce the inequalities faced by this group in higher education. This final section will explore the ways that estranged students may align with or reject the term 'estrangement', drawing on media written by estranged students themselves and some academic studies that have touched on these elements.

While the sector has agreed on the term 'estranged' to describe students who have difficult relationships with their family, some students may not identify with the term for various reasons. For some, *"estrangement isn't as simple as it sounds"* (Anonymous Oxford student, 2018) and fails to capture the complexity of individual family circumstances, while others view 'estrangement' as a label that acts as a tool to access university support (Y. Taylor & Costa, 2019). Some students view the term 'estrangement' through a negative lens, seeing it as a deviant or stigmatised label tied to darker periods of their personal history that does not align with their desired selves (Costa et al., 2020b). Indeed, the stigma around family estrangement can permeate individual identities and create a sense of guilt, particularly for students who initiated their estrangement (Anonymous Oxford student, 2018; Scharp & McLaren, 2017). As a way to distance from the negative

connotations with the term 'estrangement', undergraduate and postgraduate students from two Scottish universities in Costa et al.'s study aligned with terms that reflected *"what you are now instead of what happened"* (postgraduate student Emma, in Costa et al., 2020b), such as 'independent' (see also Lisa & Unite Foundation, 2022).

Other students do align more positively with the term 'estrangement'. As explored in the previous chapter, family estrangement can be a source of liberation from challenging family environments (Linden & Sillence, 2021; Melvin & Hickey, 2022), and these sentiments have been echoed by estranged students who describe estrangement as a means to gain independence from their family (Buttle UK, 2022; Key, 2019). For example, in interviews with 25 undergraduate students from Scotland, some students described how estrangement was a transformative and emancipatory process that gave them freedom to embrace their identity, especially for those who had experienced conflict with family over their culture or gender identity — *"getting away from them I feel a lot better about myself and I feel much more comfortable in my own skin"* (estranged student in Minty et al., 2022, p. 47). Thus, estrangement may represent an empowering identity for young people and exemplify a journey from a challenging past into a better future (Casey, 2018). These narratives emphasise the importance of moving beyond the 'deficit' model that estranged students are positioned within in higher education: while their history can pose practical barriers when entering and navigating higher education, it can be one that provides many personal strengths.

4.7   Conclusion

This chapter has situated estranged students within the English higher education research and policy context, considering the complex positioning of estrangement as a widening participation category. Flawed definitions used across the sector fail to acknowledge the dynamic and fluid nature of estrangement as explored in Chapter 3, resulting in students falling through the gaps of identification in

population data and to access support. In particular, the way that widening participation policies fit students into one categorisation of 'non-traditional' student marginalises the intersecting layers of inequality that may shape individual students' experiences — which this chapter explored further for estranged students who are also care experienced, mature, or LGBTQ+. Overall, this chapter has considered how the taken-for-granted nature of family in British society shapes higher education policy in ways that perpetuate a deficit model towards estranged students, and the importance of moving past this stigmatising perspective and listening to estranged students themselves.

With the joint contexts of family, estrangement, and higher education in mind that have been introduced through the thesis so far, the final literature review chapter will focus on the growing field of research about the everyday lived experiences of estranged students in higher education and their engagement with different sources of support that this study fits within.

CHAPTER 5

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Chapter 4 discussed the positioning of estranged students within the higher education sector as a widening participation category and the emerging data that helps to contextualise what the population of estranged students may look like. It highlighted a vital need to listen to estranged students' perspectives about their own university experiences, rather than imposing a presumptuous deficit model around family ideology. Thus, this chapter will critically analyse the existing literature that explores the lived experiences of estranged students within higher education, considering how they navigate their day-to-day lives at university, the formal support mechanisms that they draw upon, and will touch on the ways that they build support for themselves. This is the field of inquiry that my research project directly contributes to by providing a longitudinal narrative lens to gather in-depth insights of the transitions and turning points that are significant to estranged students themselves in the middle of their studies.

It will start by discussing the literature on estranged students' experiences during their higher education studies, exploring the common domains of finance, accommodation, and mental health. Within each domain, insights on how estranged students' experiences may vary over time will be highlighted, including during holidays and within the socioeconomic contexts of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis. The second half of this chapter will critically analyse the support mechanisms that are commonly implemented to aid estranged students through their studies, discussing the strengths and limitations of such support.

Compared to other widening participation student groups, few academic studies have explored the lived experiences of estranged students in higher education. Therefore, this review draws upon research across three main categories:

- survey research conducted by charities, especially Stand Alone, to identify common themes in estranged students' experiences of higher education (e.g. Become et al., 2020b; Bland, 2018; Unite Foundation & Stand Alone, 2015)

- mixed-methods studies commissioned by charities or government within a theme to present recommendations for improving policy and practice (e.g. Minty et al., 2022; Rouncefield-Swales & Bland, 2019; Stevenson et al., 2020)

- qualitative exploratory studies conducted by academics interested in deepening understanding of how estranged students navigate higher education without family support (e.g. Costa et al., 2020a; Key, 2019; Marvell & Child, 2023; Spacey & Sanderson, 2021)

Rather than privileging academic studies over 'grey' literature, this chapter will consider these different studies in tandem as together they provide the strongest insight into how estranged students experience higher education. Moreover, this review also incorporates news articles and autobiographical blog posts from estranged students. These student-led sources provide diverse and unique personal narratives about their university experience, unfiltered by external analysis, which aids in breaking down the homogenous and deficit-based perspectives of family estrangement currently favoured by society (Hugman, 2022) and in the higher education sector.

5.1   Estranged students' experiences

This section will discuss the existing research on estranged students' lived experiences in higher education to situate my research within this context. Compared to other widening participation groups, there is very little research on

their transitions in to higher education, instead focusing on the 'struggles' (Costa et al., 2020a) that estranged students face once they have entered the higher education field. Four thematic domains in the literature about their experiences will be discussed in turn: finances, housing, wellbeing, and holidays. Before beginning, it is important to acknowledge that the experiences of estranged students discussed in this review are not necessarily unique to estranged students — they may be experienced by the wider student population, especially in the temporal context of the pandemic, or by other widening participation student groups. The discussion will pay particular attention to how these shared experiences may be uniquely experienced by or exacerbated for estranged students due to their family circumstances.

5.1.1 Financial experiences

The core experiential theme in existing research with estranged students is a sense of 'struggle' when navigating their finances in higher education. As explored in Chapters 3 and 4, university students are expected to draw upon economic capital from their families during their studies (Scharp & McLaren, 2017; Scheinfeld & Worley, 2018), reinforced by SFE's parental-income-based Student Finance model (Antonucci, 2016). The challenging financial experiences of students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds include students struggling to afford the necessities of student life (e.g. Crawford et al., 2017; Hordósy & Clark, 2019), and research with estranged students has considered how these issues may be further exacerbated when studying without the expected economic 'safety net' (Spacey & Sanderson, 2021, p. 43) of family.

Indeed, Student Finance is only intended to cover term-time costs due to the assumption that students 'return home' and are supported by their families during the holidays (Bhattacharya & Payne, 2024; Minty et al., 2022). In contrast, estranged students commonly need to stretch this same financial support to last throughout the calendar year. An early survey with 584 students with Student Finance estrangement status by Stand Alone found that 53% of estranged students

felt their maintenance loan was not enough to live on (Bland, 2015). Even when receiving additional financial support through bursaries, estranged students often feel that their funds are insufficient to cover all the costs of student life on campus (Marvell & Child, 2023), and the challenges with managing finances are particularly exacerbated during the holidays (Costa et al., 2020a; Key, 2019). Things become even worse in periods of crisis — the recent socioeconomic contexts of the pandemic and a cost-of-living crisis have exacerbated these pressures for all young people (Open Data Institute, 2023), but emerging findings have considered the ways that financial concerns are exacerbated even further for estranged students. Surveys conducted by charities during the initial stages of lockdown found that estranged students often continued to pay for all their usual expenses while also encountering unexpected costs, such as upgrading their technology or internet connections to continue studying from home (Become et al., 2020b; Buttle UK, 2022). For those unable to cover these costs with their limited funds, estranged students may have experienced what Mueller (2020) described as 'digital poverty', as their financial situation had a knock-on effect on their ability to engage in academic and virtual social life at university. My research aims to expand upon these dominant narratives of financial challenge and explore how estranged students navigated their finances and managed their economic capital over time during this unique temporal context.

The difficulties in affording student life are further exacerbated for estranged students due to the widely reported challenges faced in accessing Student Finance. The need for students to provide 'proof' of estrangement from a reputable professional, such as a teacher or doctor, has been commonly identified as a major barrier preventing estranged students from receiving the maintenance loan (Bland & Blake, 2020; NUS, 2008; Spacey, 2020). For example, obtaining evidence requires students to disclose and share their estrangement story — which may be deeply traumatic or emotionally challenging (Hank, 2024; Scharp, 2017) — with someone they may not know well, and this has been described as a distressing experience by students (e.g. Key, 2019). While alternative evidence such as documentation from social services or homelessness registration may assist with

the application (see Minty et al., 2022), Bland (2015) argued that even students with this formal documentation also struggle with the confusing and bureaucratic process to access financial support, with some waiting for up to ten months into their course to receive their maintenance loan.

Moreover, there has been increasing consideration in the literature of how Student Finance imposes a narrow perspective of estrangement which can majorly disadvantage those whose lived experiences deviate from the presumed norm. Echoing the previous chapter's discussion around the issues with the 'formal' definition of estrangement, S. Blake (2023) labelled the definition as imposing a 'harsh binary' of estrangement, that does not reflect or acknowledge the diverse forms of estrangement captured in the wider literature such as cyclical or emotional estrangements (Agllias, 2016). Indeed, this 'harsh' approach to SFE's handling of estrangement was highlighted by a media controversy in 2018 that SFE were trying to catch out and 'persecute' estranged students by monitoring their social media for family contact and removing their funding if their family contacted them, even if not consensually (see Weale, 2018). This demonstrates a dissonance in how the state positions estrangement as a deviant problem through the lens of family ideology, and the diversity of lived experiences of estrangement that have been captured in the wider literature (as explored in Chapter 3). The current higher education funding system positions students who have fluid or cyclical relationships with their parents as invalid and 'cheating' the system or undeserving of support. The end result is that estranged students are discouraged from trying to rebuild family relationships, because their survival relies on financial support from SFE that will be taken away if they contact their estranged family.

Another common source of funding that estranged students use to supplement the gaps in statutory support is through part-time work. Surveys of the overall student population in the UK have found that between over 50% of students work part-time during their studies, often doing so to help cover their living costs (Bhattacharya & Payne, 2024; NUS, 2022b). Historically, universities have discouraged their students from working part-time by imposing limits on the number of hours they can

work or banning it entirely, but the changes in socioeconomic context have led to an increased tolerance of students working alongside their studies (Freeman, 2023). Indeed, qualitative studies with estranged students have consistently found that students take part-time work to help cover their increased costs in term-time and in the holidays. For example, Minty et al. (2022) found that 13 of the 25 estranged students (in further and higher education) in their Scottish study did part-time work during their studies, working between 3 and 40 hours per week in term time. While this work is often necessary to cover the costs of living, it takes a significant proportion of their time away from them to dedicate to their academics or engaging in the wider student experience compared to their peers who can draw upon financial support from their family (Key, 2018; Spacey & Sanderson, 2021), perpetuating inequalities in participation.

Furthermore, many estranged students report difficulty finding consistent and reliable work, especially during the holidays, becoming reliant on precarious, insecure, or even dangerous work to cover their costs (e.g. Costa et al., 2020a; Marvell & Child, 2023). The need for stable work became especially precarious during lockdown, as the overall 'student economy' crashed and many job opportunities for students disappeared (Parrott, 2020a). Many students did not have formal employment contracts, meaning they could not benefit from the government's 'furlough' scheme, and full-time students are unable to claim Universal Credit, placing students at a disadvantage compared to non-students during the pandemic (Become et al., 2020b; Buttle UK, 2022). These issues would be especially devastating to estranged students already facing the financial challenges discussed earlier, and highlight a concern that economic systems in the UK within and beyond higher education are shaped by family ideology (see Chapter 2), disadvantaging those who are unable to draw upon the economic 'safety net' of family.

5.1.2 Housing experiences

Alongside finances, another common experiential theme is that of estranged students struggling to find affordable and suitable accommodation as a result of

their family circumstances. There are societal and cultural assumptions that most university students move away from 'home' and study closer to their university campus, and this is the dominant experience as 62% of the full-time student population live away from their family home (Hubble & Bolton, 2020). For estranged students who may be forced to move out of their 'family home', it is easy to assume they would have a 'normative' student housing experience of living on campus with other students, but the literature highlights the varied housing circumstances for this population. Early surveys with estranged students found that their living situations commonly differed from the norm, with many estranged students living in rented accommodation alone or with non-students (Bland, 2015, 2018). Indeed, in the HEPI Student Experience survey, with a sample of 791 self-identified undergraduate estranged students participating, 50% lived over 10 miles away from campus, compared to 33% of the overall population (see Bhattacharya & Payne, 2024). These emerging findings suggest that estranged students' experiences may also intersect with 'commuter' students, another widening participation umbrella of students. These 'commuter' students face barriers to higher education participation due to their geographical distance from campus (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Maslin, 2025), where the physical distance from the 'institutional community' may lead to an emotional distance too, impacting students' ability to feel they belong (Casey, 2018). It is clear that there are further lenses of disadvantage and intersectionality that have yet to be discussed in the literature on estranged students.

Unite Foundation and Stand Alone (2015) attributed the diverse housing situations for estranged students to the barriers they commonly face when accessing student accommodation. Indeed, both university-owned and private accommodation for students often require a guarantor, a (financially stable, usually older) person who takes legal responsibility for the rental contract in case the student fails to pay rent or causes damage to the property. The consequences of not having a guarantor may include students needing to pay up to a year of rent in advance (Ellison, 2023b), or losing out on the opportunity to live in their desired accommodation (Ellison, 2023a). While this may be improved in coming years, as the upcoming Renters Rights Bill will ban landlords from charging more than one month of rent in advance (see Dickinson,

2025a), the continued need for a guarantor may still exclude estranged students from their desired housing. This inability to provide a guarantor can be faced by other student groups, such as working-class or international students who do not have an eligible person due to financial or residency reasons (Bland, 2018), but the consequences particularly disadvantage estranged students who may not be able to rely on the financial or emotional capitals from their family to assist them in finding alternative housing.

Without a guarantor, estranged students may have their accommodation choices limited to less secure options. Qualitative studies with estranged students report how many are reliant on shorter-term contracts and have to regularly find new places to live (Buttle UK, 2022; Key, 2019). Rather than having their own room or space, estranged students describe sofa-surfing between friends' or family members' homes, an informal experience of homelessness which increases the risk of being unhoused entirely (Casey, 2018; Minty et al., 2022). A common thread in estranged students' narratives when they have secured a stable housing environment is sentiments of luck and gratitude (e.g. Anonymous Cambridge student, 2020; Key, 2018; This Is Us, n.d.), highlighting how secure housing circumstances that are taken for granted by the majority of students are more precarious for estranged students who cannot draw upon family support. This housing insecurity was exacerbated further during the pandemic: messaging during lockdown encouraged students to 'return' to their family home and stay there, but thousands of students were forced to isolate in their student housing or wherever they happened to be when restrictions came into force (Hurst, 2022). A collaborative charity-ran survey with 251 care experienced and estranged students highlighted a common concern that their housing was at risk due to the lack of communication from their housing providers (Become et al., 2020b). In a follow-up survey in the summer of 2021 with 166 students, many care experienced and estranged students reported being misplaced from their intended residence during lockdown, and 13% considered breaking national guidelines and risking their health to leave unsafe living situations (Unite Foundation et al., 2021). This disruption to

housing causes stress and interrupts the students' ability to focus fully on their studies.

One aspect of housing that is considered an extremely unlikely circumstance for the majority of students, but holds a looming presence in estranged students' narratives, is the experience of homelessness. Many estranged students in exploratory studies voice a fear of homelessness during their studies and after graduation (Key, 2018; Spacey, 2020), with some students in Minty et al.'s (2022) Scottish study recalling how attending higher education felt like their only route to prevent homelessness. This is a warranted fear given the prevalence of homelessness in estranged young people, as 33% of students surveyed by Bland (2015) had formally registered, or considered registering, as homeless at some point before entering university. The persistent threat of homelessness and the challenge in accessing secure housing differs from their non-estranged peers, where secure housing is often both a rite-of-passage and a presumed fact — this study will explore how estranged students navigate these difficulties with housing during their studies.

While most research on estranged students focuses on their physical living situation, an interesting dimension that my research will investigate is the importance of 'home'. As explored in Chapter 3, the concept of home is strongly tied to family ideology, positioned in society as a stable place that nurtures and protects family (e.g. Steel et al., 2012; Zufferey, 2022). For many British students, there is an emotional significance given to the family 'home home', while their university 'home' is considered more of a temporary space (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005; Kenyon, 1999), and there is a widespread notion that many students experience 'homesickness' when studying away from their family home (Prospects, 2024). Given the practical barriers discussed so far, this raises questions as to how estranged students engage with 'home' and how far they can create a 'home' at university. Estranged students may experience what I have called 'emotional homelessness' (Waterman, 2019) — even when estranged students have a roof over their head, inadequate and insecure housing conditions prevent students from

creating the safe sanctuary needed to feel 'at home' in the way other students do in their 'family home'. Spacey and Sanderson (2021) reflected on how students in their study created safe spaces and cultivated a sanctuary in their university accommodation, providing a place of freedom compared to their negative experiences in the family home. My study aims to explore this notion of how estranged students grapple with the concept of 'home' during their studies further, considering the positive role that personally built support can have in fostering a sense of 'home'.

5.1.3   Mental health and wellbeing experiences

The third experiential theme explored in the existing literature on estranged students is their mental health and wellbeing. Experiencing mental health difficulties or being diagnosed with a mental health condition has become more prevalent in higher education overall, as 1 in 4 students have a diagnosis and even more self-report mental health difficulties (Lewis & Bolton, 2024). The socioeconomic context of the pandemic and a cost-of-living crisis increased anxiety and stress levels across the student population (NUS, 2022a): for example, 74% of the 1,339 students surveyed by Student Minds felt that lockdown negatively impacted their mental health, introducing mass uncertainty and disconnecting them from their student community (Frampton & Smithies, 2022). Mental health problems are the most common reason that undergraduates withdraw from their studies (Sanders, 2023), highlighting the importance of supporting student wellbeing.

In the overall landscape of student mental health issues, estranged students are particularly at risk, impacting their continuation and success in higher education. As discussed in Chapter 3, the reasons for family estrangement often include traumatic experiences like abuse, neglect, or family conflict (Agllias, 2017a; Carr et al., 2015), and estrangement can be a distressing experience in itself (Dattilio & Nichols, 2011; Scharp, 2017). With this context, it is little surprise that many estranged students have mental health conditions including anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and eating disorders (Marvell & Child, 2023;

Minty et al., 2022). Moreover, emotionally processing those challenging family experiences may be difficult to do in a higher education context, as one student anonymously wrote in an article, *"the pace of Oxford life meant that I had very little time to stop and gather my thoughts at what had happened to me"* (Anonymous Oxford student, 2018). These findings highlight a complex lens of disadvantage with mental health that stem from estranged students' personal lives and histories outside of the institution.

Estranged students' wellbeing is also impacted by events that happen during their studies at university. The barriers that estranged students face in other areas of their student life, such as with finances and accommodation, add more pressure that students need to balance alongside their studies. Difficulties accessing support may exacerbate these issues, especially considering how students must recall and disclose their histories to access Student Finance or support from their institution (Bland & Blake, 2020; Stevenson et al., 2020). These processes that demand emotional labour from estranged students can be challenging, especially when there are fears of judgement and stigmatisation. Moreover, emerging findings highlight how existing wellbeing struggles were exacerbated as a result of the pandemic. Estranged students' perspectives shared in the initial stage of lockdown had common themes of feeling isolated in empty accommodation while everyone else 'went home' (Become et al., 2020b; Mueller, 2020; Weale, 2020). Estranged young people surveyed by Buttle UK (2022) later in the pandemic reflected on intense feelings of isolation, especially when unable to afford or access technology to digitally connect with their peers. This loneliness enhanced the emotional strain around family, as many young people described being concerned about the health and wellbeing of their estranged family members (Anonymous Cambridge student, 2020; L. Blake et al., 2020). My research aims to expand upon these initial findings and consider how estranged students managed their mental health during the pandemic.

One element of student experience that can enhance their wellbeing during their studies is feeling a sense of 'belonging' within their university. Research with other

non-traditional students using a Bourdieusian lens has considered how these students can struggle to assimilate into higher education when their habitus does not 'fit in' as well as traditional students (e.g. Burnell, 2015; Crozier et al., 2019). For estranged students whose habituses are missing the expected level of family closeness and support, they may experience 'othering'. For example, Marvell and Child (2023) highlighted that the normative student is a young person whose primary focus is on their education, enabling them to 'fit' in the higher education field more comfortably than care experienced and estranged students, whose past experiences of trauma are not accounted for in higher education. Moreover, the family-oriented practices and perspectives deeply entwined with studenthood can give estranged students a sense of culture shock or imposter syndrome (Hakim & Anonymous Students, 2022), highlighting their differences and risking isolation. This may be exacerbated by intersectional identities such as age, class, gender, sexuality, or disability — for example, older estranged students described not aligning with the normative 'party culture' for students and reported emotional distance from their university peers as a result (Marvell & Child, 2023; Stevenson et al., 2020).

While this 'othering' lens positions estranged students at a major disadvantage, other qualitative explorations of estranged students' perspectives highlight some interesting ways that estranged students can find a sense of belonging at university. When estranged students reached adulthood without a sense of belonging in the family field, the educational field can provide a fresh start, acting as an escape and space of liberation for estranged students to truly be themselves (McRae, 2023; Minty et al., 2022). Furthermore, the 'hidden' nature of estrangement and means that some estranged students may choose not to disclose their family circumstances, allowing them to maintain some privilege in higher education by presenting as normative (Marvell & Child, 2023). These findings begin to interrogate the deficit positioning assumed upon estranged students by the sector and highlight some of the ways that intersectional and personal identities may shape their experiences of higher education, elements that my study will explore further.

5.1.4 Experiences during holidays

While existing research has used cross-sectional designs to explore estranged students' experiences of higher education, retrospective accounts shared by students commonly reflect on the ways that the university holidays worsened existing challenges. Since Student Finance is not intended to cover costs outside of term-time, estranged students often have to stretch their budgets much further, and are more reliant on part-time work to cover the costs that are not incurred by students who can simply 'go home' during the holidays (Bland, 2015; Minty et al., 2022). Indeed, this inability to 'go home' means that those in student accommodation with contracts that end in the summer holiday face an increased risk of homelessness if they cannot arrange short-term housing over the summer (Key, 2019; Marvell & Child, 2023). These common experiences highlight a temporal challenge during the holidays that estranged students face disproportionately compared to those who have family support.

Moreover, literature written by estranged students themselves echo the findings from the wider estrangement literature about the emotional challenges that surround 'trigger dates' (L. Blake, 2017), recurring events associated with family on a personal and societal level. Particularly affecting Christmas, due its significant focus on family togetherness, there is a strong sentiment of isolation for students who remain in student accommodation alone (Powling, 2017), seeing on social media that others are having an idealised Christmas they cannot share (Anonymous Oxford student, 2018). Other familial holidays can occur during term-time that estranged students have to emotionally navigate while studying, including widely observed events like Mother's/Father's Day, and personally significant dates like family birthdays or anniversaries (Bhartwas, 2023; Key, 2018). These challenges may have been intensified during lockdown when estranged students had fewer ways to distract themselves (B. Harrison, 2020).

Despite identifying the intensification of challenges during holidays for estranged students, there has been very little research conducted during these periods. An

institutional case study was conducted by Spacey (2020), where participants were asked to take photographs during their Easter holiday and discuss them in a focus group. One interesting insight from this study was the significance of coping strategies to 'get through' the holidays, such as visiting friends, seeing new places, engaging in hobbies, or taking up more work (Spacey, 2020, pp. 5-6). These findings begin to interrogate the deficit notion that estranged students are entirely reliant on their institution to draw support from and demonstrate the ways that estranged students can have agency in their student experiences. My study aims to help fill this gap in understanding around how estranged students temporally navigate their higher education studies and capture the fluid and dynamic nature of their experiences.

5.2   Support for estranged students

Alongside the exploration of how estranged students navigate higher education, much of the existing literature has taken an interest in how universities support this population, considering the types of support that are available to try and 'fix' the issues (Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009) faced by estranged students, and the ways that estranged students engage with that support. The second half of this chapter discusses these findings and highlights the ways that institutional support can fail to help those who need it most. Furthermore, this chapter will take a wider perspective to understand how estranged students not only engage with formal support offered to them by their university, but also the different informal support mechanisms estranged students create for themselves within and beyond their institutional field. This wider perspective including informal support structures is a key novel contribution I will make in this thesis.

5.2.1   Institutional support for estranged students

As part of their widening participation commitments, universities must provide a range of support to their disadvantaged students, aiming to improve the students' continuation, attainment, and completion rates (Office for Students, 2024b). Early evidence of increased withdrawal rates for estranged students was found by Bland (2018), whose survey of 564 formally identified estranged students found that 41% had considered withdrawing from their studies, and 14% had. However, they did not share comparison with non-estranged students to know if estranged students' rates were higher. Recent official data has made these comparisons, with (Office for Students, n.d.) publishing figures that show estranged students' completion rate is significantly lower than non-estranged students (see Figure 4.1 on page 70). As a result of these concerns, estranged students are increasingly included in support considerations, both as eligible for more generic support and with tailored support mechanisms for students studying without family support, often combining care experienced and estranged students together. This section will discuss common support mechanisms available to estranged students at universities, and the research findings of how estranged students engage with this support.

It is important to acknowledge from the start some of the important contexts that shape the landscape of support. First, there are no statutory requirements of what support universities must offer non-traditional students as part of widening participation policy, resulting in a vast difference in support between institutions (Marvell & Child, 2023; Minty et al., 2022). For example, some institutions may feel it is unnecessary to have support for estranged students if there are very few at their university. In contrast, universities who have large numbers of estranged students may struggle to distribute their resources across the students compared to those who have fewer (Bhattacharya & Payne, 2024). This variation results in a kind of lottery as to whether estranged students are able to access good support. There are no evaluations of the effectiveness of support provided by institutions on estranged students' attainment or outcomes (Sanderson & Spacey, 2021), and a sense of 'best practice' is difficult to determine beyond anecdotes from staff.

Support offered to estranged students by universities

Many universities provide centralised financial support to estranged students in the form of funding and information services. Financial support that estranged students commonly draw upon often targets the wider student population (e.g. budgeting advice, hardship funds) or the broader widening participation population (e.g. nonrepayable bursaries for low-income students), but few provide tailored support for estranged students. In my analysis of 42 Stand Alone Pledge letters for my undergraduate dissertation (Key, 2018), only 63% of universities mentioned a specific bursary for estranged students — even for these institutions who were actively supportive of estranged students to sign the Pledge, not all of them provided tailored financial support, suggesting that few other institutions may do so. A handful of universities also offer additional funds at challenging temporal moments, such as during the summer holiday and after graduation (Spacey & Sanderson, 2022). A recent HEPI Student Experience survey found that 43% of estranged students received a bursary, 18% accessed a scholarship, and 10% drew on hardship funds for financial support from their university (Bhattacharya & Payne, 2024).

While these tangible funds aim to provide financial capital that is more equitable with that received by students with family support, many limitations have been reported in the literature, typically stemming from the use of the problematic 'formal' definition of estrangement discussed in the previous chapter and other misguided assumptions about estranged students. Estranged students who are not identified by SFE are often automatically deemed ineligible for bursaries, meaning many students with fluid and diverse family relationships lose access to these reliable funds. They may become more reliant on institutional hardship funds, but these funds designed for the wider student population may not take into account the specific circumstances of estranged students: Minty et al. (2022) reported that many estranged students who have to save their money to survive the summer months are often rejected for having funds, forcing students to reach financial destitution before receiving support (Stevenson et al., 2020). This was exacerbated further during the pandemic, as

the overall increased demand for hardship funds excluded many estranged students from accessing them (Become et al., 2020a; Mueller, 2020). These findings highlight a mismatch in the financial needs and circumstances of estranged students and the assumptions that institutions make about them, which risks perpetuating the financial inequalities of this population.

Given the challenges in accessing stable accommodation for estranged students in the research, universities also commonly offer support with housing and accommodation. Common provision for accommodation described in Stand Alone Pledge letters in 2022 included year-round availability of university-owned accommodation, information and advice to source housing, financial support through bursaries to cover living costs, and few also provided a guarantor scheme (Spacey & Sanderson, 2022; Spacey et al., 2023). This provision is well-meaning and intends to act as a safety net to prevent homelessness, but qualitative studies with estranged students have found barriers to accessing this support. Accommodation offerings from universities are often too expensive for estranged students (Y. Taylor & Costa, 2019), especially when the risk of homelessness comes from financial challenges. Similarly to the challenges in accessing financial support, estranged students may face barriers accessing housing support and only receive it once homeless (Key, 2019). As discussed previously, one prominent barrier when estranged students try to access accommodation is the need for a guarantor. However, even when institutions offer a guarantor scheme (in which the university itself acts as the student's guarantor), many schemes have limited places, inconvenient timescales, or require you to stay in university-owned accommodation (Ellison, 2023b).

One rarely considered aspect of housing support for estranged students is the difficulty of creating a 'home'. Within social work research around youth homelessness, there is a sentiment that housing support from the state fails to acknowledge these emotional elements, as *'it is easier to allocate someone an accommodation, than to help them establish a home'* (Aaslund, 2021, p. 75) — this can ring true in higher education as well. While on occasion universities have

proactively provided support such as offering bedding and kitchen packs to estranged students (Key, 2018; Spacey et al., 2023), in general universities prioritise ensuring estranged students have a physical house, with little effort put towards ensuring a safe and stable emotional 'home'. This 'emotional homelessness' can result in continued disruption for estranged students, impacting their ability to engage with and succeed in their studies.

In response to the growing prevalence of mental health issues for the student population, support is also offered by universities in this domain. Most universities offer a counselling service and self-help wellbeing resources for the overall student population, while tailored support for estranged students commonly includes a dedicated point of contact at the institution and opportunities to meet other estranged and care experienced students (Spacey et al., 2023). The positioning and specific responsibilities of dedicated contacts varies across each institution, but generally their job is to relieve the pressure in navigating bureaucracy at the university from the students from entry to graduation by signposting and supporting them to receive appropriate support (Lisa & Unite Foundation, 2022). Some also offer pastoral support themselves through office hours or other small-scale interventions such as sending Christmas cards and hampers to students (Stevenson et al., 2020).

However, the experiential literature with estranged students describes a range of barriers to receiving adequate support with mental health and wellbeing. Counselling services have the potential to greatly support estranged students, as studies with estranged adults who received private therapy have reflected on the positive impacts of a warm and empathetic therapist (L. Blake, Rouncefield-Swales et al., 2023). However, university counselling designed to support the wider student population is often underfunded and can have long waiting lists or complicated access processes, leaving estranged students at risk of missing out on support (Bhattacharya & Payne, 2024). Even once seen by a counsellor, many estranged students report feeling that their mental health circumstances are too complex to handle or feel that their estrangement is stigmatised and judged by university

support staff (Marvell & Child, 2023; Spacey & Sanderson, 2021). The lottery around receiving adequate support particularly applies when it comes to dedicated contacts: Bhattacharya and Payne (2024) described how there is a paradox that at universities where there are more estranged students, individual students often receive less personalised and proactive support despite the stronger institutional messaging for estranged students. Additionally, while peer support groups offered by dedicated contacts are viewed positively in the sector and support those students who wish to meet others who understand their family backgrounds, some students in qualitative studies have expressed that this support feels unappealing (Key, 2019; Spacey, 2020). This finding begins to break down the homogeneous and deficit models surrounding estranged students, highlighting the importance of offering differentiated, tailored support for individuals based on their needs.

So far, this chapter has explored the institutional support mechanisms identified for estranged students and their effectiveness in supporting with their domain-specific needs. Alongside these issues, there are systemic concerns that create barriers for estranged students engaging with support in general, particularly for those who are not proactively contacted by their university. One of the earliest reports on estranged students' experiences of higher education found that only 36% of the 84 self-identified estranged students had accessed support from their university (Stand Alone & Centre for Family Research at University of Cambridge, 2015). This sentiment is echoed in more recent studies that found some estranged students do not know that support is available at their institution (Bland, 2018; Stevenson et al., 2020), especially when students are unclear of what the term 'estranged student' means (Minty et al., 2022). Moreover, Sanderson and Spacey (2021) identified a risk that universities create a fragmented support system across multiple departments, leaving students unsure of where to go. This need to repeatedly disclose their estrangement identity when seeking support leaves students at risk of stigmatisation and increased levels of stress (Costa et al., 2020b), meaning that the process of accessing support creates further challenges for estranged students in ways that do not impact other widening participation populations.

There is also little understanding of how estranged students were supported during the pandemic. This was a period of unexpected crisis and change for all students, but estranged students were at particular risk of falling through the gaps in support when universities assumed that all students were able to draw on family support at this time. It is incredibly difficult to map what support universities offered throughout the pandemic, but some emerging practices mentioned in reports included proactively contacting students to ask what support they needed, priority access to hardship funds, delivering food parcels, relaxing accommodation contracts, online counselling and social events, and academic adjustments (Become et al., 2020b; Office for Students, 2020b; Parrott, 2020a). The temporal framing of my research project enables exploration of how estranged students engaged with and perceived the support offered by their university during the pandemic.

What comes next for institutional support for estranged students?

Much of the push for institutional support for estranged students came from Stand Alone, who created the Stand Alone Pledge in 2016 (Mueller, 2024). This scheme encouraged higher education institutions to publicly commit to supporting estranged students within four key areas that align with the experiential challenges found in the literature: finance, accommodation, mental health, and outreach. As of March 2024, 114 universities and colleges had signed the Stand Alone Pledge by writing a letter to the charity expressing their intentions of support for estranged students (Mueller, 2024), and much of the discussion about support offerings above is driven by what institutions wrote. However, as these letters provided an overview of what institutions *wanted* to do, it may be an inaccurate reflection of what they offer in reality; either not capturing the full scope of their support (Spacey et al., 2023), listing ideas that were never implemented, or eulogising support that was poorly received by the estranged students themselves. Other advocacy has come from researchers, whose findings have led them to argue that universities 'lack a deep understanding of the day-to-day struggles' (Costa et al., 2020a, p. 119) of estranged students. Estranged student campaigners themselves have also called for universities to approach individual students with an openness and acknowledgement of their personal backgrounds

and circumstances, without generalising or assuming their specific support needs (see Bhartwas, 2023; Fallon, 2017).

However, with the closure of Stand Alone in March 2024, questions arise as to how far universities will continue to actively acknowledge and commit to meeting the support needs of estranged students without an official 'pledge' or unified campaigning network to drive them (Blower, 2024). The National Network for the Education of Care Leavers (NNECL) charity have expanded their Quality Mark scheme to include estranged students, but this is not a simple transfer of momentum. In a recent report, Bhattacharya and Payne (2024, p. 42) discussed how the Quality Mark requires more labour from institutions than just writing a letter, meaning only 21 universities had received it; and the progress in institutions working towards the Quality Mark has recently stalled due to government interest in making a similar scheme. Thus, this thesis is situated at a critical turning point, where it remains to be seen how far estranged students will continue to be uplifted in widening participation policy and support practices.

5.2.2 Support beyond the institution for estranged students

While the majority of students are able to frequently and reliably draw upon their parents or wider family for support during their studies (Stevenson & Bland, 2017), estranged students may not have as obvious support sources beyond their university. There is a risk that estranged students are framed at a deficit, as entirely reliant on their university for support with a 'lack' of capitals and resources from the usual 'safety net' of family (Costa et al., 2020a). However, in reality, the 'absence' of family capitals and support does not mean that students have no external sources of support at all. Indeed, estranged students can, and do, forge supportive relationships in more nuanced and diverse forms, which may include friends, partners, and extended family members, as well as draw upon formal support structures from other organisations. This section will explore the few research projects that have discussed the role of peer support for estranged students and identify other formal mechanisms that estranged students draw upon.

Personal support from peers, partners, and family

The core personal support networks for estranged students come from peers or romantic partners, whose relationships may be formed prior to or during their studies (Bland, 2018). While platonic and romantic relationships may provide estranged students with practical and emotional support instead of family, these are not necessarily equal, adequate, and permanent 'replacements'. Students in Buttle UK's (2022) survey during the pandemic identified how relationships with peers and partners can change or break down entirely, reinstating the 'gaps' in support from family. Indeed, when estranged students are dependent on their friends for material support such as housing or finances, this can add strain to relationships and leave estranged students feeling vulnerable and at risk of losing this support in a way that other students do not have to worry about (Minty et al., 2022; Parrott, 2020b).

Moreover, many studies have explored how estranged students may be uncomfortable sharing their family estrangement circumstances with others, even those they are closest to. In a larger survey of estranged people which included 84 self-identified estranged students, only half of them had disclosed their estrangement to their partner or closest friends, and 58% of these students had not shared the full story (Stand Alone & Centre for Family Research at University of Cambridge, 2015). Indeed, the strong stigma associated with family estrangement in society and the ingrained assumptions that students receive family support in higher education leads many estranged students to fear being misunderstood by their peers, being asked invasive questions, or being treated differently after sharing their story, and therefore resist disclosing their past (Fallon, 2017; Spacey & Sanderson, 2021).

In contrast, some estranged students may consider their chosen relationships to be familial. Lauren, a participant in my undergraduate dissertation exploring the experiences of estranged students in higher education, described her friends as *"the family I have chosen"* (Key, 2019, p. 100). As explored in Chapter 2, the concept of 'families of choice' holds its origins in research about LGBTQ+ relationships (Heaphy, 2016; Weeks et al., 1999), but has been increasingly used

when considering how young people actively expand their use of the word 'family' to describe loving and caring relationships more generally (Jones-Wild, 2012; Parker & Mayock, 2019). Research with international students has also found that many regard their friends or wider academic community as 'family' (Stevenson & Bland, 2017), but there has been little exploration into how this concept applies to estranged students. I argue that this is due to the deficit model of estrangement applying a lens of family 'absence' on estranged students, which precludes any discussion of how estranged young people are finding empowerment by actively engaging with and redefining 'family' for themselves.

While relationships with friends and partners are acknowledged by the current research, institutional support is framed as the only kind of support that really matters. Other studies have emphasised the importance of personal relationships with friends and family in helping students during their studies, both with non-traditional students (e.g. Bathmaker et al., 2016; Raaper et al., 2022) and for the wider student population (e.g. Azaola, 2020; Wilcox et al., 2005). Despite the formal definition of estrangement only considering breakdowns in parent-child relationships, existing literature tends to ignore estranged students' relationships with extended biological family members, with a notable exception being Marvell and Child's (2023) recent study that found some participants regularly accessed material and emotional support capitals from their grandparents. I believe that this reductionist approach stems from the 'deficit' model placed on estranged students by policy and researchers, which assumes that students are positioned solely within the institution and have an 'absence' of external support. There has been little critical engagement of whether this discourse wholly reflects the complex, fluid, and diverse realities of estranged students' lived experiences — a gap that this study will fill.

Formal support from charities and estranged student-led communities

Alongside the role of personal relationships, there are a range of third sector organisations and student-led communities that advocate for and offer support services to estranged students. This does not intend to be an exhaustive list but

highlights some examples of different support tailored to estranged students that they may access beyond the institution to assist them.

One charity that provides practical and pastoral support to estranged students is the Unite Foundation — collaborating with purpose-built student accommodation provider Unite and around 30 university partners, they run a scholarship which has provided over 700 care experienced and estranged students with free ensuite accommodation for up to three years (Unite Foundation, 2024). A survey with students on the scholarship reported that most felt safe and secure in their accommodation and built strong communities within their halls — even during the pandemic, 70% of scholarship students still felt positive about their university experience (Unite Foundation, 2021). This scheme shows a strong example of how providing estranged students a stable space that can become their 'home' has a positive impact on their ability to succeed in their studies. However, as the scholarship only runs at a handful of institutions, and estranged students must be granted 'formal' estrangement status from SFE to be accepted (see Unite Foundation, 2024), many estranged students are unfortunately excluded from this scheme. Alongside the scholarship, they also host an online student community called All of Us, facilitating students to connect to others nationally, to get involved in advocacy campaigns, and to access tailored employment opportunities for estranged and care experienced students (Ellison, 2021; Hakim & Anonymous Students, 2022).

Prior to their closure, Stand Alone provided a detailed online guide to applying for Student Finance as an estranged student (Stand Alone, 2020), and a list of institutional dedicated contacts for prospective estranged students. However, few students were familiar with these resources until after they had already finished applying (Stevenson et al., 2020); and while this list provided a helpful database of institutional contacts, the reliance on institutions to manually update their details with the charity meant that information was not necessarily reliable. Estranged students may also benefit from a similar support database designed for care leavers called Propel, created by charity Become which provides contact information of each

university's point of contact and a list of available support. Other organisations include Buttle UK — an organisation providing grants to young estranged people between 16-20, including university students — and EaCES, an estranged and care experienced student-led network that created a handbook with information and guidance to navigate student life (see EaCES, 2024).

5.3   Looking ahead to graduation and post-university

Although my study was interested in the experiences of estranged students during their higher education studies, I found that the participants regularly looked ahead to the end of their studies and reflected on their goals and aspirations for the future (see Chapter 11). This led me to explore the existing literature on estranged students' transitions out of higher education, on which there are a handful of studies. These experiences will be explored in this final section of the chapter.

While many students look forward to graduating, recent studies with estranged students found that many share concerns for their survival post-graduation. In their qualitative study with Scottish estranged students, Y. Taylor and Costa (2019) found that many feel they must quickly find stable and secure work regardless of what it is, to prevent financial destitution and homelessness after their studies end. This sentiment was echoed by final year students in Rouncefield-Swales and Bland's (2019) survey research with 85 estranged students and recent graduates, with one student writing *"I'm more focused on surviving after graduation than graduating"* (estranged finalist, p. 8). These findings suggest that rather than being able to live in the moment and focus on their studies, estranged students must continuously look ahead, a temporal theme that my longitudinal research expands upon.

These unique concerns faced by estranged students stem from the sudden loss of support upon graduation. In Spacey and Sanderson's (2022) review of Stand Alone Pledge letters, they identified that most universities cut off all support when a student graduated, with a notable few offering estranged students a transition bursary. The fear of losing access to support may shape post-graduation decisions,

as one estranged student shared in a survey: *"I only enrolled onto my MA as I could not comprehend what life would be like out of this structure left to navigate the world as an individual with few support networks"* (estranged student, in Rouncefield-Swales & Bland, 2019, p. 7). These concerns are reminiscent of those found in research about the transitions of care experienced students out of higher education, where graduating students stand at a 'cliff-edge' when they lose access to institutional support (Baker, 2024b). In addition, many of the informal support structures created by estranged students during their studies, such as relationships with peers and staff members, will be strained or lost entirely after graduating.

Furthermore, Rouncefield-Swales and Bland's (2019) study considered how students engage with graduation itself. For the majority of students, graduation ceremonies are an opportunity to celebrate their achievement of completing higher education, but for estranged students its family-dominated nature can be a challenge. The sentiments around graduation for their participants highlighted how students felt they did not 'belong' there, with themes around discomfort attending a family-focused event or a sadness at not having people they could invite to celebrate with them. This highlights the ways that taken-for-granted events and milestones that align with family ideology can be more challenging for students without family support to engage with.

While these studies show significant concerns that estranged students have about moving on safely after their studies, it is vital to not dismiss the fact that many estranged students also share their goals and aspirations in life and work hard to achieve them. For the 85 participants in Rouncefield-Swales and Bland's (2019) study, 75% of students and graduates identified careers they wanted to work in or continue studying, such as education, care, law, engineering, and creative fields. This has been explored further qualitatively by Marvell and Child (2023), who found that their care experienced participants actively resisted what felt like a self-fulfilling prophecy of failure due to their experiences — 'our participants almost universally articulated clear, passionate and socially-oriented professional future horizons' (Marvell & Child, 2023, p. 110). These findings emphasise the importance of

listening to estranged students' perspectives, and acknowledging how many feel empowered to create and work towards their goals, rather than viewing them exclusively through a deficit lens.

5.4   Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the findings from existing research and student autobiographies that have discussed the diverse experiences of estranged students in higher education. Much of the research focuses on the significant 'struggles' that estranged students face over time and how they draw upon their universities for support. Research often assumes that estranged students cannot 'fit in' to higher education and need 'fixing' (Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009), when in fact the challenges they face ultimately stem from family ideology informing educational policy and practice. In trying to fix estranged students without taking the time to understand their unique experiences, university support systems can position students as 'at fault' for not having access to the expected family capital (McLellan et al., 2016; Spacey, 2020). Rather than imposing a deficit positionality, this thesis explores the individual, complex, and fluid narratives of estranged students' experiences of higher education.

These literature review chapters have worked together to situate this thesis within the wider social contexts and research fields — from higher education to family and estrangement. The next chapter will outline and reflect upon the methodological decisions that were made to conduct this longitudinal research project.

CHAPTER 6

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents a reflective discussion of the methodological decisions I made when designing and conducting this research project. The chapter begins by reflexively acknowledging my own positionality as an estranged student, and the paradigmatic approach that underpins this research. It will then introduce the qualitative longitudinal research design that was employed, and the changes made to the research due to the pandemic. With these contexts in mind, the remainder of the chapter presents a retrospective on the research conducted, considering sampling, data collection, data analysis, and ethical factors.

As discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis, the primary research questions for this study are:

1) How do estranged students experience family and estrangement during their higher education studies?

2) What are the significant experiences for estranged students across the academic year and holidays?

3) What support do estranged students engage with during their studies?

These questions were intentionally broad, designed to take an inductive exploratory approach led by the participants' own narratives, focusing on the parts of their experiences they found most significant. This openness allowed for exploration into emerging concepts, such as 'home' and personally built support, and the unique socioeconomic context of the pandemic.

To build upon the existing research and add depth to our understanding of how estranged students navigate the middle of their studies, this study used a qualitative longitudinal design. It captured the fluid day-to-day experiences of estranged students and how those experiences changed over time. Using a diary-interview method to capture their narratives from December 2020 to October 2021, including term-time and holidays. A purposive self-selecting sample of ten undergraduates at universities in England, who were all formally seen by SFE as an estranged student, and identified as studying without family support. An iterative, temporal thematic analysis approach enabled the exploration of how estranged students dynamically experienced higher education and their conceptual engagement with pasts, presents, and futures.

6.1   Research approach

Before discussing how this research project was conducted, I want to reflect on the importance of 'reflexivity' and acknowledge my positionality with the project. Reflexivity considers the researcher's position within their research project and highlights how our perspectives influence the entire research project: from choice of topic, research questions, conceptual frameworks, and sampling, to data collection and analysis methods (Cruz, 2015; Holmes, 2020). As value neutrality is not possible in qualitative exploratory research that aims to address inequalities and challenges in education and society (Atkins & Duckworth, 2019), it is vital to reduce hidden bias by discussing the researcher's personal experiences and assumptions around relevant concepts (Macfarlane, 2009; Sultana, 2007). The discussions in this chapter are largely informed by reflective notes I made in a researcher diary throughout the PhD process. Reflective journals aid transparency and increase rigour by keeping a 'trail' (Ortlipp, 2008, p. 696) of the decisions made during the research process, and are especially encouraged during longitudinal studies that involve ongoing analysis (see McLeod, 2003). Overall, I found these diaries incredibly beneficial. They provide a unique insight into my decision-making over the past five years, showing how my approach and perspectives have shifted over time.

6.1.1   Positionality on the nature of research

Social research is underpinned by methodological paradigms, a philosophical worldview that shapes the nature of that inquiry (Hammersley, 2012; Willis, 2007). Researchers hold ontological beliefs — whether the world has an objective 'truth' or if there can exist multiple 'truths' (Cohen et al., 2018).   Ontologically, this research is underpinned by an interpretive constructivist approach — shaped by a belief there is no universal 'truth', but that individuals hold their own perceptions of their reality that are dependent on the social and cultural context they live in (Glesne, 2016; Ma, 2016).   Moreover, researchers have epistemological assumptions regarding what counts as 'knowledge' and how it can be understood (Sol & Heng, 2022).   Epistemologically, this study views data as 'relational' (Clandinin, 2016), generated in a collaboration between the participant and the researcher, and unique within the temporal and spatial context that it was sought. In conducting this research, I did not seek the objective 'truth' of how estranged students navigate higher education, but to explore their personal 'truths' about their lived experiences. The knowledge of these 'truths' is co-constructed by each of the participants and myself as the researcher, making it vital to acknowledge my own positionality and research approach that shaped it.

6.1.2   Positionality on the topic of inquiry

An epistemological point of consideration when researching a topic related to our own lived experiences is the importance of making 'visible our own positions' (Zufferey & Horsell, 2022, p. 13) to reduce implicit biases. As discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, my own story of being an estranged student over the last decade has shaped my interest in this topic and mode of inquiry through research. Therefore, I hold an 'insider' positionality (Holmes, 2020) which I have been profoundly aware of and have reflected on throughout my research.   I am not claiming that my perspective is an objective or privileged 'truth' — instead, I aim to acknowledge the lens through which I approached the topic, and how that lens

shaped my interpretation of participants' narratives about their own 'truths'. Other researchers with alternative perspectives may draw different, equally valuable, conclusions (Bernardes, 1997; Maxwell, 2005).

My lived experiences of family estrangement, and my academic/campaigning work with estranged students, have led me to develop my own assumptions and beliefs about the concepts of family and estrangement explored by this thesis. As Bernardes (1997) argued, sociologists rarely give the same level of critical attention to their conceptualisation of 'family' as they do to other theoretical concepts, falling into a 'language trap' where each individual falsely assumes their definition is common-sense. In my exploration of the literature around estranged students, it was common to see papers making blanket statements that estrangement causes 'struggle' in higher education and accepting that position of social abnormality as 'truth' without question. To prevent doing the same, I make my perspectives on family and estrangement clear:

- I hold a blended poststructural and interpretivist approach to 'family' (see Chapter 2). I believe that family has the potential to be 'practiced' or 'chosen' in ways that are personally meaningful with anyone (D. H. J. Morgan, 1996; Weeks et al., 1999). However, the strength of family ideology and the ways it shapes social discourse and policy prevents 'chosen families' from being 'displayed' (Finch, 2007) or perceived as legitimate.

- I view family 'estrangement' as an ongoing process positioned on a continuum, rather than a binary 'cut off' (in line with Scharp et al., 2015; Scharp & McLaren, 2017) (see Chapter 3). It is a deeply personal and complex experience. I believe estrangement is a difficult decision to make and a valid solution for challenging family relationships, and do not believe that reconciliation is always the 'ideal' result.

This is not to say other perspectives are invalid or false, but my epistemological position holds a strength in this research by listening to the participants and

uplifting their perspectives without imposing a 'deficit' position or perpetuating stigmas of family estrangement. While this section has considered the ways that my positionality shaped the approach to the research topic of inquiry, the ways that my perspectives shaped the ways I engaged directly with the students who participated will be discussed in the Ethics section.

6.2   Research design

6.2.1   Initial design: longitudinal comparative case study

Originally, the proposed research for this PhD was a longitudinal comparative case study of two universities, comparing how estranged students' experiences varied over time at one university that had signed the Stand Alone Pledge and one that had not (see Key, 2019, for more information). This research aimed to heavily situate the students into their institutional contexts, to explore the differences in how students perceived their experiences and the support offered to them by their university over time. As a collaborative project with the Stand Alone charity, it intended to consider the impact of formal support initiatives like the Stand Alone Pledge on their student experiences. Proposed methods included document analysis of institutional policies and an in-person diary-interview method with estranged students at two universities in England.

However, COVID-19 and the ensuing lockdown forced adjustments to this design. Practical concerns arose with the two-step recruitment process of universities then students, especially as research participation was not an institutional priority for universities at this time. The necessity to move data collection online also opened up to a larger geographical sample of students and removed travelling costs. This unique socioeconomic context raised new conceptual questions around how estranged students navigated a changing higher education landscape, and capturing institutional diversity with this change felt more important than conducting deeper case studies into institutional contexts. Taking these changes into account, the comparative case study design elements were removed from the study.

6.2.2   Final design: qualitative longitudinal narrative design

This research implemented a qualitative longitudinal (QL) design. Longitudinal research designs involve collecting data from the same people on more than one occasion (Bynner, 2006). QL research is specifically interested in collecting rich data to explore processes, changes, continuities, and influences over time, understanding 'how people narrate, understand and shape their unfolding lives and the evolving world of which they are a part' (Neale, 2019, p. 1). Rather than collecting retrospective data at one moment in time, a QL design enables the researcher to 'walk alongside' participants over an extended period (McLeod & Thomson, 2009). Each wave of data collection provides a 'snapshot' within its temporal context, that together creates a 'movie' of participants' overall experiences (Neale & Flowerdew, 2003).

This particular QL study also draws upon narrative inquiry in its design. Narrative research takes interest in the experiences that people have, and the ways that they tell a 'story' about those experiences (Barnwell & Ravn, 2023; Squire, 2013). Rather than finding a single truth, narrative research explores how 'a single phenomenon may produce very different stories, even from the same person' (Squire et al., 2019). Narratives are both personal and relational, co-constructed between the participant and the researcher (Clandinin, 2016), furthering the importance of reflexivity. The data collected in this study is seen as a temporal narrative — estranged students did not just share their day-to-day student experiences chronologically, but continuously reflected on their past, present, and future in ways that provide unique insights into the dynamic nature of how they perceive their lives (Chase, 2018).

This design enables the research to address a gap in the existing literature on estranged students' experiences of higher education. As discussed in the previous chapter, cross-sectional studies with estranged students have identified common challenges that are faced at certain temporal periods, particularly during the holidays when universities 'close' (e.g. Bland, 2015; Spacey, 2020). While identifying the challenging experiences that estranged students may have, there

are no studies that longitudinally explore how estranged students perceive and navigate these experiences *as they happen*. Thus, this project aims to contribute a longitudinal and narrative lens to the relatively unexplored literature around estranged students' experiences of higher education, by 'walking alongside' (McLeod & Thomson, 2009) the participants and exploring the dynamic, fluid experiences of estranged students over time. Its focus is centred on estranged students' voices, what they deemed significant enough to share in their narratives, and how these aspects changed over time. My reflections on the complexity of conducting a QL narrative research project will be discussed throughout the remainder of this chapter.

6.3   Applying time and temporality theory

Underpinning QL research is the importance of 'time'. Neale (2019) describes time as the 'lynchpin for understanding the essentially dynamic nature of lived experiences, and the relationship between personal lives and wider historical processes' (p. 2). When exploring experiences longitudinally, time can be conceptualised as fixed or fluid (Adam, 1990).

- **Fixed time** is shown on a clock or calendar, linearly progressing and experienced equally by all of society, including events in the academic year (term time, holidays) and broader social occurrences (Christmas and other familial events).

- This contrasts with **fluid time**, where the progression of time is experienced relative to each individual's personal milestones, experiences, and perceptions.

This study explores both conceptualisations and is especially interested in how these types of 'time' can align or misalign for estranged students.

Alongside exploring the interplay between fixed and fluid time, QL research enables capturing changes over time, such as turning points and transitions (Neale, 2021). Turning points are 'critical events, defining moments, interactions or epiphanies that can act as mechanisms or triggers for change' (Neale, 2019, p. 39), and transitions are related to the 'passage from one concrete status or circumstance to another' (Neale, 2019, p. 42). Existing research on estranged students' experiences has identified common temporal moments in the calendar year that may be turning points or transitions, such as the holidays or graduation (e.g. Rouncefield-Swales & Bland, 2019; Spacey, 2020). However, the cross-sectional design of previous studies has focused on estranged students' interaction with the 'fixed' academic time with little exploration of the dynamic and fluid 'individual' time. While data in this study was collected over a chronological timeline and designed to consider their evolving present experiences, the students' narratives also fluctuated between retrospections on their past and prospectively considering their future.

6.4 Longitudinal frame of the study

In practice, the design frame for this study was temporally informed, designed to explore change and continuities in estranged students' journeys. To capture as much of their university experience as possible within the restrictions of a PhD project, this study collected data between December 2020 and October 2021. The study took a prospective and retrospective frame, simultaneously exploring narratives of events, thoughts, and feelings in the present, in addition to reflections on past events (Neale et al., 2012). I used multiple data collection tools which complemented one another so that participants could fluidly reflect on their past, present and potential future experiences as an estranged student and create a rich narrative of their university journeys (Henwood & Shirani, 2012). Figure 6.1 on the next page provides an overview of the temporal frame of the study.
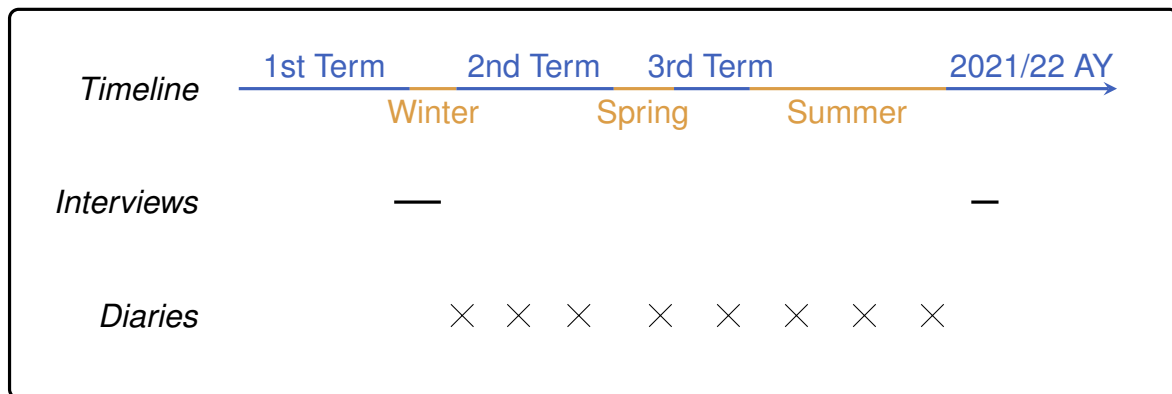
Figure 6.1: Temporal framing and data collection waves of the study

Practically, a strength of this longitudinal design was how it enabled flexibility in times of crisis. For example, I originally intended to collect data from the beginning of the academic year in September 2020, but after disruption caused by the pandemic, I was able to adjust the timeline while still covering key moments in the students' academic journeys. Moreover, the pandemic itself became a conceptual element to explore with the participants. I planned to do a total of five interviews across the study at the end of a term or holiday period, but due to personal health issues during the data collection period this was limited to two interviews, one at the beginning and one at the end of the study. When the process of continuous data analysis revealed interesting insights around how the participants engaged with concepts like 'family' and 'home', the design allowed future diary entries and interviews to ask follow-up questions and investigate further (Hermanowicz, 2016). These changes were not always by choice but increased the rigour of the research overall as I was able to respond appropriately to situations impacting myself and the participants (Neale, 2019).

6.5 Sampling

For this study, a purposive self-selecting sampling strategy was used (Newby, 2014). The goal was to reach as much of the population of estranged students as possible, allowing volunteers to reach out if they wished to participate. The target population for this study and the rationale for this was:

- students who self-identified as estranged from family — to avoid the shortfalls of the SFE definition of 'estranged students' which excludes many who have diverse experiences of estrangement that are important to capture

- 'home' students studying at a university in England — due to differences in policy and funding contexts between nations and home/international students

- undergraduates who had at least two years left of their studies — to understand estranged students' experiences in the middle to explore day-to-day narratives of student life, rather than during the significant transitions in or out

- full-time students who were not on a placement or 'sandwich year' — to capture the day-to-day student experiences on campus rather than outside the university context

In the 2020/21 academic year, there were 8,938 estranged students at English universities identified by SLC (Student Loans Company, 2025a). However, as discussed in Chapter 4 these official figures fail to capture students who are ineligible, were rejected, or did not apply for financial support from SFE — I did not want to exclude students with lived experiences of family estrangement simply because they were not formally recognised. It was not desirable to assess whether a sample of estranged students was representative as the research questions and objectives of this study were interested in students' narratives of their experiences over time. This required trusting relationships and continuously engaging with the participants over a significant period of time (Neale, 2019). As such, a small sample was necessary to enable the in-depth relational rapport between myself and the students to co-create their temporal narratives.

6.5.1   Recruitment methods

To aid with recruitment, I created different promotional materials to summarise the purpose and procedure for the research and contact details to register interest in the study. Core information was included in a poster (see Appendix A on page 309)

and a website using an FAQ format to provide more in-depth information (see Appendix B on page 310). In these materials, I used the term 'estranged student' alongside language such as 'studying without support from your family', aligning with previous research with this population and to prevent excluding students who may not personally identify with, or be aware of, the term 'estrangement' (e.g. Costa et al., 2020a; Minty et al., 2022). Interested students had the option to register through email or via a short form on the website that asked for their name, email address, and had space to ask questions about the study.

The primary method of recruitment was by contacting university dedicated contacts who acted as gatekeepers in this study. Recruiting participants through gatekeepers is beneficial to gain access to less visible populations (Patrick, 2012), like estranged students. I obtained contact emails for dedicated contacts at 98 universities in England from a public directory on Stand Alone's website. In late November 2020, I sent each dedicated contact an email with information about the study, including the poster and a link to the website, requesting that they circulate the information with their students (email template in Appendix C on page 313). I asked them to encourage any interested students to reach out to me directly rather than via their institutional gatekeeper in order to protect their privacy.

Of the 94 successful emails sent to institutional gatekeepers (four emails returned an error with no alternative contact), only 19 responded to let me know they would circulate the information with their identified estranged students. The resource I used to identify gatekeepers was managed by staff at Stand Alone rather than updated by the gatekeepers themselves, meaning that contact information may have been out of date. The low response rate was also likely impacted by a strict period of lockdown coinciding with my emails in late November 2020. Gatekeepers who did not respond may have still circulated the information with their students, but this low response rate biases the sample towards students attending institutions with proactive and engaged student support teams. Five of the ten participants in my final sample attended universities whose gatekeeper responded to my email.

Another limitation of recruiting through dedicated contacts at universities was that eligible students may have been excluded depending on how the institution defined 'estranged student'. As discussed in Chapter 4, there is no standardised practice for universities to define and identify their students as estranged: some may use the SFE definition of estranged student with its age and estrangement duration limits and identify students based on official 'independent student' data, while others may adopt a broader definition and allow self-identification across the student lifecycle (Spacey & Sanderson, 2022). Thus, information about the study may have only been forwarded to a fraction of the eligible students at each university, excluding those who do not meet the threshold to be recognised as estranged by their institution, and as a result biasing the sample towards students whose experiences may be more extreme. Indeed, all of the participants in this study were formally recognised as estranged by SFE despite this not being part of the inclusion criteria.

In an effort to reach these unidentified estranged students, I also repeatedly shared the poster and a link to the website on my social media profiles during the recruitment stage. I had used these accounts in estranged student networks and activism campaigning in the past, so posting online meant that the call could be seen by potential participants and those who worked with estranged students in a professional capacity, who could then share that information to those eligible. Interested students recruited from both methods used the same contact route, so it is unclear where they heard about the study from. In retrospect, I should have asked the participants how they found out about this study or used two different interest forms for each method of recruitment.

6.5.2 Sample characteristics

During recruitment, 47 individuals contacted me to register their interest. Of these, 16 were ineligible (reasons included being a first or final year undergraduate, a postgraduate, studying at a non-English university, and on a placement year), 2 registered interest once data collection had already began, and 19 eligible students did not respond while organising the first interview. These low response rates

surprised me given the initial flood of interest. It is likely that the temporal context of recruitment played a role, as it coincided with a number of significant calendar events (during a lockdown and in the run up to the January examination period). Students may have been busy with these other commitments at the time, or changed their mind about long-term participation in a research project. Overall, 10 estranged students participated in the first wave of the study. Table 6.1 on the next page provides a brief summary of the sample's student characteristics. More details are presented in the student profiles at the beginning of Chapter 7.

Within this small sample, there is significant diversity between the students. In terms of institution type that students attended, there was a relatively equal mix of Russell Group, 'post-1992' institutions that became universities following the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act, and 'new' universities that were founded later (Boliver, 2015). All of the students had been formally identified as an estranged student by SFE, meaning they were under the 25-year-old age limit, but some participants intersected with the widening participation definition of a mature (age 21+) student. This aligns with the available data that estranged students are often older as a result of family disruption in earlier life (Stevenson et al., 2020; Unite Foundation & Stand Alone, 2015). There were also some interesting similarities within the sample: students were all studying either a social science or a career-oriented degree (towards medicine or teaching). Regarding gender, the students were primarily women, with only one man (Rhys, who withdrew after the first interview) and one non-binary (Finn) participant. While it is unclear why few male estranged students were interested in participating, it is an inherent limitation of this research.

This demographic information was collected in the first interview, but other characteristics such as ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic background were not explicitly collected. Some participants disclosed these aspects in their diaries or in the interviews, but this was not guaranteed across the sample. In retrospect, a questionnaire to gather this information would have been more systematically rigorous and would have enabled a stronger intersectional approach to

Methodology — **Ch.6**

Table 6.1: Summary of sample characteristics

Student	Course	University
Beth 22, she/her	Law Year 2 of 3	New university Northern England
Rhys 19, he/him	Business Year 2 of 3	Russell Group Northern England
Priya 21, she/her	Asian Language & Business Year 3 of 4	Russell Group Northern England
Kate 21, she/her	Medicine-aligned Year 2 of 3	Post-1992 Southern England
Sophie 21, she/her	Sociology Year 2 of 3	New university Northern England
Asha 19, she/her	Medicine Year 2 of 5	Russell Group Northern England
Dani 19, she/her	Primary Education Year 2 of 3	New university Northern England
Finn 25, they/them[a]	Criminology Year 2 of 3	Post-1992 Southern England
Hollie 20, she/her	Sports Year 2 of 3	Russell Group Southern England
Nadia 19, she/her	Politics Year 2 of 3	Post-1992 Southern England

[a] Finn used any pronouns, with no preference. For ease of reading in this thesis, I use they/them pronouns consistently when referring to Finn.

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understanding estranged students' experiences, and I recommend including this in future research.

6.5.3 Attrition in the sample

As a longitudinal study, students had to commit to long-term participation with diaries and interviews. This design is important to garner in-depth insights of their student experiences and create their student narrative, but it may have prevented students who have more day-to-day challenges from participating. In fact, throughout the data collection period, five of the participants temporarily or permanently withdrew their participation from the study. Rhys notified me of his withdrawal after the first interview as he wished to prioritise his studies, whereas Hollie and Nadia stopped responding to emails. Beth and Finn temporarily withdrew from some waves of diary entries as they prioritised other academic and personal commitments, and re-entered in a future wave — I then asked them about their experiences in the periods they did not write diary entries in the second interview. Attrition in this study is visually represented in Figure 6.2 on the following page.

Attrition in longitudinal research is common, and participants may withdraw from some or all waves in a study, resulting in missing data (Bytheway, 2012; Derrington, 2019). This can be especially impactful in studies with small samples as it increases the risk of reducing the sample size significantly and creating biases in the data (Farrall et al., 2016; Neale, 2019). One recommended method to mitigate attrition is to 'oversample' in the first wave to ensure that there are still enough participants in the later waves (Neale, 2019). However, as discussed earlier, recruiting students was challenging and finding more to participate in the first wave was not possible.

I utilised multiple methods to mitigate the risks of attrition and maintain integrity in the study. Maintaining contact with participants assists in reducing the risks of attrition, but in practice this was challenging. I kept regular contact by emailing monthly reminders about the diary and sending their next month's template, but I was keen to minimise the number of reminders to avoid creating power imbalances

	Int 1	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Int 2
Beth	▓	▓		▓	▓		▓	▓	▓	▓
Rhys	▓									
Priya	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓
Kate	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓
Sophie	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓
Asha	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓
Dani	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓
Finn	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓				▓
Hollie	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓				
Nadia	▓	▓	▓	▓	▓					

Figure 6.2: Overview of which data collection phases each student participated in (shaded). Months listed represent when diaries were collected, not the date they were written.

by 'tracking' participants (Miller, 2015). Rather than 'chasing' students who did not reply, I acknowledged that participation in this study was likely a low priority in estranged students' already very busy lives and prioritised respecting their voluntary participation (Ward & Henderson, 2003).

As the only contact information I had was a student's institutional email address, one possible explanation for attrition is that students may have withdrawn from their studies or otherwise lost access to their institutional email. I gave all participants the option to provide a personal email as an alternative in the first interview, but none chose to. In retrospect, I should have strongly encouraged the participants to provide an alternative email, even if only to update them about progress with this research and its outputs.

6.6 Data collection methods

To collect longitudinal qualitative data on the experiences of estranged students in higher education, this study used a diary-interview method (Zimmerman & Wieder,

1977). As this project was interested in exploring estranged students' narratives of what was significant to them, these data collection methods gave 'voice' to the participants to share either in their own words on paper or in collaboration with me in the interviews (Clandinin, 2016; Leeson, 2014). Diaries provided 'snapshots' about their experiences and perceptions in real time, while interviews enriched this data by asking students to reflect on what they wrote about, providing rich contemporaneous and retrospective data (Bynner, 2006; R. Thomson & Holland, 2003). Both were essential methods in themselves, that together constructed the participants' narratives of their student experiences. A visual overview of when each method was used can be found in Figure 6.3 on the next page.

To maintain rigour in the data collection process, I balanced continuity and flexibility: the core research questions acted as a baseline of what to explore, and adjustments were made to focus on significant themes across the participants (Saldana, 2003). Together, these data collection tools enabled an in-depth exploration of processes, changes, and continuities in the experiences of estranged students over time (Neale, 2019). Additionally, maintaining my reflexive researcher diary throughout the data collection process enabled me to keep a detailed record reflecting the complexity of the research, and the project management strategies I used at the time. Details about how each of these methods were utilised will now be discussed.

6.6.1 Diaries

Diaries are a 'regular, personal, and contemporaneous' record of experiences, thoughts and feelings (Alaszewski, 2006, p. 1), situated in the temporal and spatial context that they were written in (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015; J. Scott, 2006). Diary writing is typically a private, personal endeavour, though made increasingly public through the digitisation of 'diarising' in social media or blogs (Cucu-Oancea, 2013; Savin-Baden & Tombs, 2017). In this study, diaries were used to make a novel contribution to the literature by exploring the day-to-day student lives, understanding the thoughts, perspectives and experiences of estranged young people over time 'in their own words' (Corti, 1993, p. 2). While designed for the
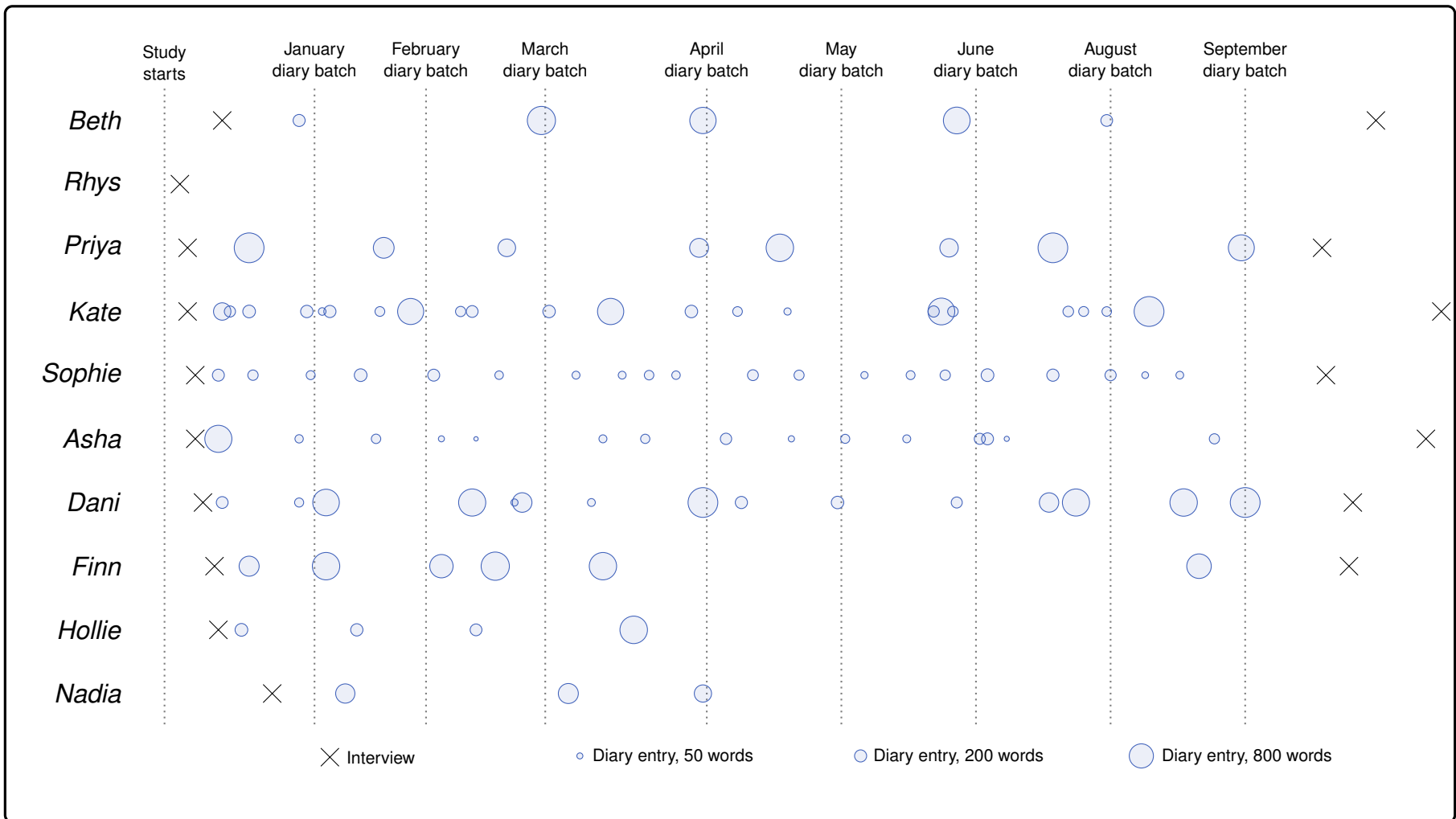
Figure 6.3: A visual timeline of the date and length of each diary entry written by the students.

participants to write about current events, they had a broader temporal frame as participants used their present experiences as a springboard to reflect on their past and their anticipations for the future (Baker, 2023; Fincher, 2013).

While many diary-interview studies use paper diaries, I planned to use an online diary for this study to reduce costs and the risk of non-return, but also as virtual 'diarising' through apps or social media is likely to be a more familiar process for students (Hyers, 2018). I deliberated between different platform options to host the diaries, such as submitting forms, hosting a blog website, or emailing entries, and chose to use Google Docs, a free web-based word-processing platform. Google Docs is a good fit for university students because it is a familiar platform available on most devices, and was further a good fit for estranged students for privacy reasons: students could complete their diaries without linking to a personal account. Furthermore, it was the most convenient option as students did not have to send their completed diaries back, removing a barrier to receiving the data.

Event-contingent diaries involve participants writing after specific events, while time-contingent diaries are written in set intervals determined by the researcher (Bolger et al., 2003). The design in this study was a combination that enabled flexibility based on participant preferences. Each month, I created a personal document with the diary template for each participant and emailed them a link which allowed them to edit it. The diary template consisted of a prompt box at the top of the page and open space below that enabled participants to include text or images 'in their own way' (Basit, 2010, p. 150). There were variations in the prompt each time that encouraged them to write about temporally significant events, and the students were also sent a 'final diary' prior to the second interview with some specific thematic questions (see Appendix D on page 314).

Students were asked to write at least one entry per month and encouraged to write multiple if they wished, giving the participants autonomy and control in when, where, and how to construct their narratives (Grinyer, 2005). Indeed, as visualised in Figure

6.3 on page 126, there was great variability in the length and frequency of diary entries. Kate, Sophie, and Asha wrote many short entries, while others wrote longer entries less often — these differences did not result in a difference in quality but enabled the participants to construct an in-depth narrative of their experiences with agency. Stylistically, the students exclusively wrote text (with the exception of a photograph of Dani's pet rabbit) in informal language where they described ongoing events and their thoughts and feelings around them, akin to personal diaries but with me as the audience in mind (S. Scott, 2022).

Following recommendations from Alaszewski (2006), I introduced participants to the diary-writing process at the end of the first interview. I either screen-shared (on video calls) or verbally described (on phone calls) an example diary to the participants to familiarise them with the process (see Appendix E on page 318). Anticipating that the students were used to academic writing standards and may have felt anxiety about the process, I provided time and space to allow them to ask questions and raise other concerns. I made sure to explicitly say that their spelling and grammar did not need to be perfect — thus, all quotations from diaries used in this thesis are verbatim.

Reflections on using diaries with estranged students

This section will reflect on how estranged students engaged with this diary method. The methodological literature has considered how participants may find reflective writing more challenging than speaking about their experiences, or struggle to dedicate time to writing entries, resulting in variable 'quality' across a sample (Blythe, 1989; Neale, 2019). When I asked students in their final interview about how they found diary writing through the study, many of the participants had found it challenging to make time to write their entries while navigating their studies, which was reflected in the attrition rates of some diary waves.

Others reflected on the challenges of writing for a researcher 'audience' (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015), and questioned whether their entries were suitable for the study:

> *"sometimes I wrote it and I was like 'I don't really know if I'm supposed to be writing this, but I'll just go with it'"* (Beth, int 2)

> *"sometimes I did find it hard to think about what to talk about or sometimes I felt like I was repeating things from my last diary"* (Priya, int 2)

These doubts and the desire to write 'appropriately' for the purposes of research shapes the ways that students construct their narratives and the content that they include (Pini & Walkerdine, 2011) and highlight how diaries were also 'relational' (Clandinin, 2016) even though I was not physically present. The very act of completing diaries for research changes the ways that students will perceive their university experiences and may notice different aspects than if they were not reporting them (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

In contrast, there were also many benefits in using a diary method for this study, both for the research and the participants themselves. For example, being able to write entries as events happen result in a reduction of memory bias compared to needing to wait for interviews (McCulloch, 2004). Reflective writing is a recognisable process to many young people (Hyers, 2018), and three of the seven participants asked in the final interviews acknowledged that their familiarity with writing diaries for personal or academic purposes made the process straightforward and even enjoyable.

Moreover, there is potential that participants can feel therapeutic benefits when reflecting on experiences for a diary-based study (Bartlett & Milligan, 2015; Cao & Henderson, 2021), echoed by two of the students in their final interviews:

> *"it was basically like a therapy session for me [...] it'd just flow and it would come really quickly"* (Dani, int 2)

> *"it was quite reflective [...] when you think about it and look back on the month, you're kinda like 'oh god I actually got through that eventually'"* (Beth, int 2)

For these students, the diary method facilitated a positive process of reflection that in itself supported them through their higher education journeys. A final benefit for the participants was the potential to feel empowerment in sharing their stories, as Finn described:

> *"knowing that obviously you're on the other end and you're doing your study and stuff has been way better than putting it in my book that's down here and no one ever, you know it doesn't see the light of day"* (Finn, int 2)

In this way, the rationale for participation in the study for some participants echoed my own rationale for campaigning and researching this topic, to draw upon our stories to improve the experiences of estranged students in future generations. The diaries facilitated their own, usually marginalised or silenced, 'voice' to be heard in an empowering way to help others (Atkins & Duckworth, 2019; Scharp, 2016).

6.6.2   Interviews

I conducted two semi-structured narrative interviews with the participants: a briefing interview at the beginning of data collection, and a closing interview at the end. A narrative interview 'encourages and stimulates an interviewee [...] to tell a story about some significant event in their life and social context' (Jovchelovitch & Bauer, 2000). In this study, narratives were jointly produced through conversations between myself and the participants, shaped by broad questions about their experiences in higher education as an estranged student. As the diaries were designed to focus on the contemporaneous experiences as they happened, I used these interviews to frame their diary entries, retrospectively exploring their past experiences from their present perspective, and their anticipations for the future (Kvale, 1996; Neale, 2019). Moreover, these interviews facilitated a direct relational dialogue between myself and the students to collaboratively refine their narratives and explore what aspects of their student experience were meaningful to them (Mears, 2017; Riessman, 2008).

Interviews took place on a digital platform chosen by the participant, with audio calls via telephone, and video calls taking place on Zoom or Microsoft Teams. All

interviews were recorded with participant consent and notes were taken throughout the interview. In their first interviews, I created and followed an interview guide (see Appendix E on page 318). This included scripts for information about the study, and a series of question prompts to help guide their narratives. I led with the question, 'Can you tell me a bit about your university experiences so far? Have there been any key events, challenges, or positives that you have experienced since you started your studies?'. Based on their responses, I asked follow-up prompting questions, and to facilitate further discussion I asked pre-written questions from my interview guide, which were based on the experiential and support themes (such as finances, accommodation, mental health) from the pre-existing literature. These prompts acted as 'hooks' to encourage the student to retrospectively reflect on different aspects of their experiences of higher education so far (Brannen, 2013).

I also created an interview guide for the exit interviews (see Appendix F on page 324). These final interviews were individually tailored to each participant based on what they had written in their diary entries, asking for updates with ongoing events and how they were feeling about the year in retrospect, and I used the guide to track the overarching themes to be discussed. I took a fluid temporal approach, encouraging students to both reflect on their experiences so far and how they had changed over time, and to look ahead and share aspirations for the future (Meth, 2004; Neale, 2019).

While there are concerns that virtual interviews suffer from the lack of body language and struggle to build rapport as well as in-person interviews (Glesne, 2016), it was beneficial for the students to participate in a familiar and comfortable space when talking about sensitive topics (Kähäri & Edelman, 2024; Sturges & Hanhrahan, 2004). Throughout the interviews, I aimed to foster a non-judgemental and empathetic environment, staying aware of their developing narratives and exercising flexibility in asking follow-up questions based on what they shared (Kvale, 1996; Lillrank, 2012). Rather than holding an authoritative role and focusing on the research questions, I maintained a supportive and relational approach by allowing space for other conversations led by the participants and building rapport

between us. This included answering questions they asked me about my own experiences as an estranged student and going on tangents about our shared interests, such as our favourite video games or our love for animals, which helped to build rapport.

6.6.3   Trustworthiness of data collected

Trustworthiness of data relates to the authenticity and credibility of the data collected in a research project (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Particularly in the diaries, there is a possibility that participants wrote entries on different dates than the ones stated (Phillips, 1994), and significant events may have been forgotten or re-told differently than how they were experienced at the time. I could have checked the edit history of diaries on Google Docs to validate the time and date, but chose not to as there may have been earlier drafts of diaries that they did not consent to me seeing. Epistemologically, I was not interested in finding the objective 'truth' and chronological events during their studies, but in what the participants felt was important to narrate and share with me over time and how their perspectives changed over time (Clandinin, 2016). The triangulation of data from the diaries and the interviews helps to build a stronger picture of participant's experiences, being able to explore how they narrated their experiences in the moment (diaries) and how they reflected on them in retrospect (interviews) (Gorard & Taylor, 2004). Rather than trying to 'catch out' inconsistencies in the participants' narratives, new insights demonstrated depth and fluidity in what was important to them at different moments in their student journey. Being able to ask follow-up questions about their diary entries in the second interview, rather than making assumptions based on the 'unwritten', also increased rigour and authenticity in the data (Bijoux & Myers, 2006; Cucu-Oancea, 2013).

6.7   Data analysis

To analyse the data, I used a longitudinal thematic analysis approach. Thematic analysis involves identifying codes in the data that are then grouped into themes,

to allow comparison in experiences between participants (Boyatzis, 1998). QL thematic analysis is an ongoing and iterative process — it involves looking across the dataset for temporal and experiential themes, evolving from summary to description to interpretation over time (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Neale, 2021). In terms of data management, all interviews were transcribed shortly after they were held and diary entries were collected, anonymised, and saved in folders that corresponded with a participant ID. My researcher diary enabled me to reflect on the complexities of analysing this wealth of data, which will be discussed in this section.

Data analysis on a participant-level began while the data was still being collected. I took each interview and diary entry as a cross-sectional narrative and familiarised myself with the participants' stories, identifying codes. This was an inductive and participant-driven process: I made note of aspects in their narratives that echoed findings in previous studies with estranged students or other theoretical frameworks of family and estrangement, while also making note of experiences that did not fit into them (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 2004). I used this analysis to inform future waves of the study, for example adapting the diary prompts to focus on specific upcoming calendar events, and tailoring their final interviews (Hermanowicz, 2016).

After the final wave of data collection was completed in late 2021, second interviews were transcribed, and I focused on data analysis throughout 2022. I worked through all of the transcripts for a participant chronologically before moving on to the next participant, to familiarise myself with their full narrative. I took a 'wild' approach to thematic analysis (Cousin, 2009), inductively analysing by highlighting quotes and labelling them with codes. I kept a reflective record in my researcher diary about these codes and considered how they could be grouped into themes, and how those themes may apply across participants. These codes were initially grouped into two overarching themes: 'academic' experiences (those that occurred directly in the university field, such as the classroom) and 'personal' experiences (broader experiences related to their wider personal lives).

Subsequently, I used a variety of analysis tools to summarise and make sense of the wealth of data collected. Following guidance from Neale (2019), the first step was to explore each 'case' (participant) using a thematic and temporal lens to see how their experiences changed over time. I began by creating thematic maps, which provided an overview of the key events or perspectives: I hand-drew two maps for each participant, one which captured their 'academic' experiences and one for their 'personal' experiences (see templates in Figures 6.4 to 6.5 on the next page). As I created these maps, I also wrote up detailed participant 'case histories' (Neale, 2021) to complement the maps. These were written from my perspective, describing the students' experiences within these themes and how they changed over time, and integrated quotations from the students' diaries and interviews.

The next stage was to draw comparisons between cases over time within themes to create an overall 'framework' (Saldana, 2003; Neale, 2021). To tackle the different levels of complexity, I used a spreadsheet — each sheet had a theme, with participants in columns and codes in rows, where I began to identify patterns of similarity and difference across all of the students. An example of how I presented their lived housing experiences can be seen in Appendix G on page 328. However, attempting to grapple with the large amounts of data in this stage was an especially challenging process, struggling to move past description and feeling akin to 'death by data asphyxiation' (Pettigrew, 1990, p. 281). This was exacerbated by ill health I was facing at the time, leading me to pause my studies from 2023 and return to data analysis in early 2024. Stepping back for a significant period and having my previous process recorded in my researcher diary was incredibly beneficial for me when returning to analysis. My earlier rigorous approach provided a descriptive framework that enabled me to immediately move into interpretation, exploring the nuances and temporal dimensions of their experience, and tying their narratives to the literature contexts and my research questions (Elliott et al., 2008; R. Thomson & Holland, 2003). This helped me to move past the binary personal/academic approach into the time-based structure that Part 2 of this thesis takes — exploring the past elements of their family and estrangement, how these shape the ways they navigate their present experiences in higher education, and their future hopes.
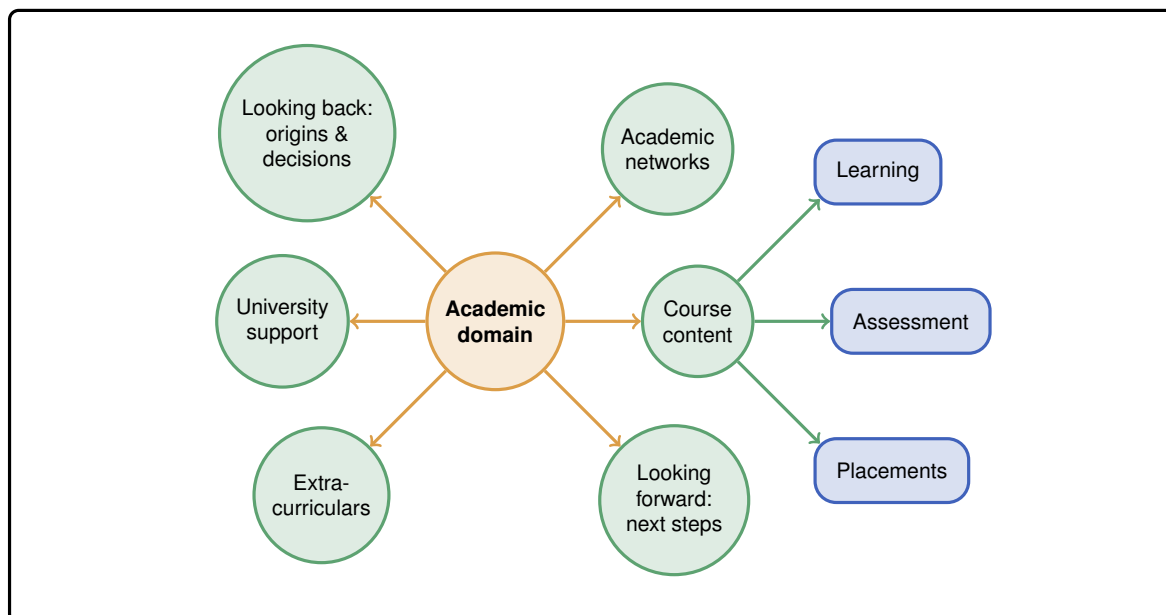
Figure 6.4: Academic map template
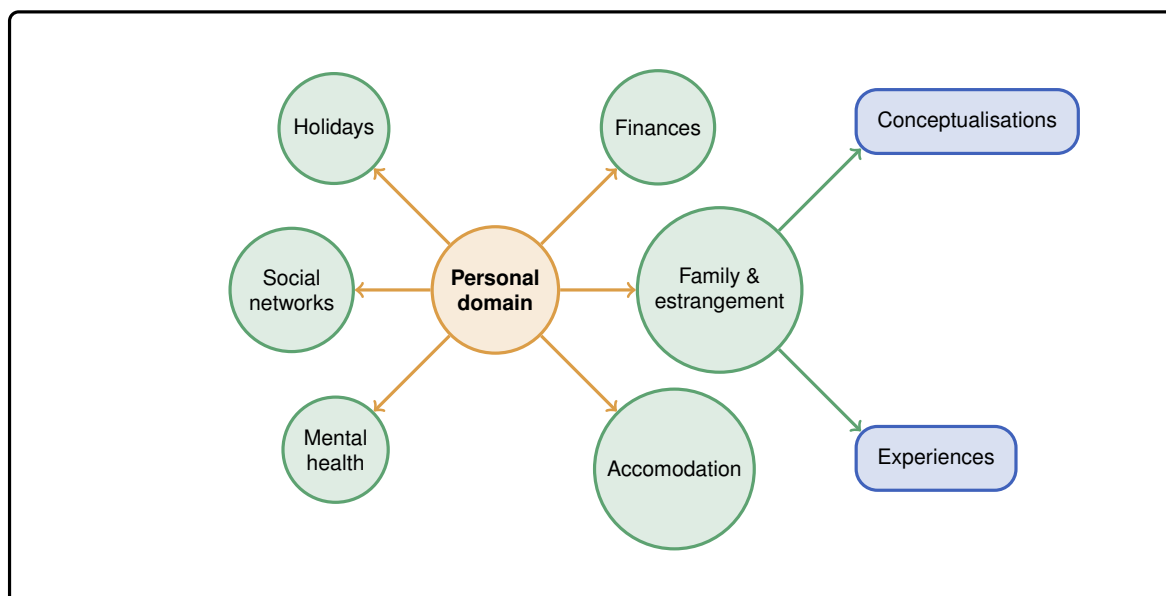
Figure 6.5: Personal map template

6.8   Ethics

At all stages of this research, ethical guidelines from BERA (2024) and the research funder, ESRC (see UKRI, n.d.) were followed. Ethical approval was sought and granted from the School of Education at Durham University (see Appendix H on page 329).

Before discussing how I addressed specific ethical issues, I want to reflectively explore my positionality surrounding ethics in social research. I believe that ethical research does not just involve ensuring that ethical guidelines are followed and 'boxes ticked', but it means actively working to make research practices ethical at every stage of a project. I lean into a social justice approach to ethics which prioritises respecting and valuing 'hidden, marginalised and silenced voices' and researchers reflecting on their positionality throughout (Atkins & Duckworth, 2019, p. 19). Thus, I have worked to ensure minimal harm was caused for the students, ensuring their participation was 'worthwhile' by working with integrity (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012).

As discussed throughout the literature review, estranged students are a group who are viewed through a deficit lens in society and higher education, due to their family circumstances and their position as a non-traditional participant in higher education, and many have experienced trauma when sharing their stories in the past (Marvell & Child, 2023; Scharp, 2016). My approach to working with estranged students in a compassionate way was informed by my own experiences as an undergraduate, where my 'story' was used across the media to raise awareness, but on reflection I was given little support and often felt unheard. It was vital that those who chose to share their story with me felt heard, respected, and their dignity preserved. I viewed the students involved as people first and participants second (Williamson et al., 2014).

6.8.1   Informed consent

Before the first interview, all participants were sent a Participant Information Sheet (see Appendix I on page 330) and Privacy Notice (see Appendix J on page 333). These contained information about the purpose of the study, what participation involved, the potential risks of participation, and how their data would be stored. Students were given the opportunity to ask questions about the study via email and at the beginning of the first interview and were asked to return a signed consent form (see Appendix K on page 338). Moreover, in longitudinal studies consent is seen as an ongoing process (Neale, 2013). I asked students verbally for their consent to participate in each interview, and diary entries that were visible in Google Docs on the pre-established deadline were seen as consenting, as students were able to go back and delete content from previous diaries they wrote that month. Students were reminded in all communications that they could contact me at any time with questions and were aware of their right to withdraw from the study without consequence, either temporarily from a single data collection wave or permanently.

6.8.2   Incentives

One ethical deliberation researchers need to make is whether to offer incentives as reciprocity for participation in a research project (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012). There are risks that incentives can influence participation in a study and potentially be coercive (Cohen et al., 2018). However, giving a physical reward as thanks is particularly important in longitudinal studies due to the continued commitment to a project, and is helpful to reduce participant attrition (Neale, 2019).

Participants were sent a £20 Amazon voucher (paid for by the funder, ESRC) at milestones during the study. While there were some delays due to processing issues from the funder and my ill health, vouchers were sent out to participants in February 2021 (for the first interview), June 2021 (for diaries from December-March), July 2021 (for diaries from April-June), and October 2021 (for diaries from July-September and the final interview) — those who participated in all

stages of the study received a total of £80 in vouchers. The decision to financially reward estranged students was made to respectfully and meaningfully thank them for their long-term participation. As participants were navigating their studies, family circumstances, and other commitments alongside their participation in the research project, and likely to be experiencing financial difficulties as well (e.g. Bland, 2018; Costa et al., 2020a), it felt ethically vital to acknowledge the time and effort that they gave in their contribution in a reciprocal way. However, it was also important to not reward participation so much that the students would feel reliant on the incentives and therefore coerced into continuing to participate.

6.8.3   Confidentiality

As QL studies collect in-depth data over time, there is a greater need to balance rich, authentic participant narratives with keeping their identities private (Neale, 2019). This is especially important for estranged students whose stories are more sensitive and vulnerable to social judgement, or potential harm from individuals in their lives (Barnwell, 2024; Wilson et al., 2022). To ensure participant confidentiality, identifiable information like names (of students, university, and other individuals) and specific details (e.g. course studied, birthdays, locations) were retracted. I chose to give the students a named pseudonym to anonymise them while maintaining the personal nature of their narratives (Heaton, 2022). While the participants were given the option to choose their pseudonym as a means of empowerment in the study (Pretorius & Patel, 2024), none of them wished to.

Moreover, this thesis does not include full transcripts of interviews or copies of diary entries because, even with significant redaction, it would be possible to de-anonymise students. I have been extremely careful in selecting which quotes I include, ensuring that I paint a fair and representative picture of the data while minimising the risk that participants can be identified.

6.8.4 'Insider' research

As touched upon when discussing my positionality to the research earlier in this chapter, I have 'lived familiarity' with the topic and consider myself an 'insider' (Holmes, 2020). I disclosed my 'insider' status with potential participants during recruitment, which helped to build positive rapport founded on empathy, respect, and equal footing with students from the start, especially as a longitudinal study that would involve repeated contact (Langellier, 1994; Neale, 2013). This impacted the data collected: in the interviews, there were occasions that students would lead their discussion of an experience with phrases that assumed my familiarity, such as *"you know how..."*. In the diaries, the open format and awareness of me as the audience may have led to students not sharing 'taken-for-granted' aspects of their experiences (Hockey, 1993). Through triangulation of the interviews and diaries and processes of reflexivity through the project, I was able to ask questions to untangle these aspects and improve the integrity of the study.

However, I am only a 'partial' insider and power imbalances between me and the participants have to be acknowledged (Hockey, 1993). While I am also estranged from my family, and had been through a similar educational journey to them as an estranged student, it was no longer an active experience I was 'living' as a PhD student off-campus. My own personal characteristics also created imbalances: while similar in age I was older than all of the participants; I held positions of privilege as a white person studying a PhD at an elite institution; and while my marginalised identities were shared with some participants, they were not with all. Though the narrative design and methods prioritised the participant's voice and facilitated relational conversations between us (Clandinin, 2016), it was not equal as I still held the position of the researcher and them the researched.

6.8.5 Sensitive research and minimising harm

A research study may be considered sensitive when participation 'potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it' (R. M. Lee, 1993,

p. 4). In Chapter 3, the ways that family estrangement can be an experience associated with grief, trauma, social judgement and stigmatisation was explored (e.g. Agllias, 2017b; L. Blake, 2017), and Chapter 5 discussed how studying in higher education as an estranged student can be practically and emotionally challenging (e.g. Costa et al., 2020a; Marvell & Child, 2023). As such, I took steps to mitigate potential harm caused by participating in the research throughout.

When engaging with students, my goal was to actively empower them to feel supported in sharing their experiences, rather than leaving them feeling more vulnerable (Munro et al., 2004). I took care with my language across recruitment, interview questions, diary prompts and other communications to not use judgemental or stigmatising messaging with students (Liamputtong, 2007). Rather than taking a neutral approach, I actively listened to and empathised with the challenges they described in interviews, such as expressing apologies when they described painful experiences or sharing their frustration with institutional shortfalls. After the first interview, I sent all participants a list of support resources for estranged students that I had compiled (see Appendix L on page 339). While the support accessed by estranged students was a topic under investigation that may have been influenced by this decision, it felt ethically necessary to provide helpful resources rather than being a passive bystander (Cohen et al., 2018).

While minimising harm for the participants, it was also important to minimise potential harm for myself as the researcher. Dickson-Swift et al. (2009) describe how conducting research on sensitive topics can often involve 'emotion work', where researchers have to manage their personal emotions that arise throughout a project. As an 'insider' who has experience of family estrangement, it was inevitable that listening to the stories from other estranged students that resonated with my own would elicit challenging emotions. Moreover, the longitudinal design of this study meant I became 'invested' in their emotional narratives (S. Scott, 2022) and particularly felt strong emotions when reading their diaries. Simultaneously, while completing this PhD I was also navigating my own 'emotional' transitions, managing new chronic health conditions and navigating my gender identity, which

made it more challenging to engage with sensitive research at times. Throughout the process of conducting this research, and the PhD overall, I have made sure to lean upon my own support mechanisms, reflect on my emotional positionality, and maintain a distance between my own 'narrative' and those shared by the participating students.

6.9   Conclusion

Overall, this chapter has provided a reflective discussion of the approach that I took when conducting this research on the experiences of estranged students in higher education. Throughout this process, I have maintained a reflexive position and strived to ethically conduct research in a way that empowered the estranged students' narratives of their 'truths'.

The QL design of this study allows exploration of students' lived experiences of higher education through a temporal lens, capturing significant turning points and transitions over time (Neale, 2019). Combining diaries and narrative interviews elevated the participants' own voices, allowing them to reflect on the important moments in their past, present, and future.

The remainder of this thesis is dedicated to discussing the findings of my research, and the unique experiences divulged by the participants.

PART II

RESEARCH FINDINGS

CHAPTER 7

LIFE AFTER ESTRANGEMENT

This chapter begins by introducing the participants in this study, briefly discussing their academic and personal backgrounds.

It will then address the first research question: *How do estranged students experience family and estrangement during their higher education studies?*. As explored in the literature review of this thesis, the prevalence of family ideology in British society frames family as a permanent and optimal structure, while estrangement is stigmatised and 'deviant'. This approach to family shapes higher education policy through the assumption that students frequently receive material and social capitals from their families (McLellan et al., 2016; Thomas, 2006). Previous research may have fallen into a 'language trap' (Bernardes, 1997, p. 5) by failing to validate that the researchers and participants had a shared understanding of these terms. As such, this study aimed to explore not only estranged students' university experiences but also made explicit how those students engaged with the concepts of family and estrangement. While the focus of this chapter is in addressing the first research question, there will be some overlap with the second research question on estranged students' significant experiences of higher education in relation to family and estrangement.

7.1 Participant profiles

This section presents biographical participant 'profiles' for each of the students who participated in this study. These are contextual narrative introductions which summarise the academic and personal backgrounds of each student, such as their

university/course choices and the circumstances of their family estrangement. They are written in the present tense, from my perspective at the beginning of data collection in December 2020. These profiles are designed to be a useful reference when reading about their higher education experiences in the forthcoming chapters.

All of the participants in this study received formal estranged student status from SFE and were familiar with the term 'estranged' as a descriptor of their family circumstances. Academically, all of the students were studying full-time degrees with in-person delivery of lectures and seminars. Three of the participants also had placements in their courses, and Priya had a year abroad in the 2019/2020 academic year. At the beginning of lockdown in March 2020, all students had their classes moved online, placements cancelled, and exams moved online or cancelled altogether. Throughout the study, these restrictions began to ease, and by September 2021 all participants had at least some classes delivered in-person again.

7.1.1 Beth

Beth (she/her) is 22 years old and in her second year of a three-year Law degree at a new, small university in the North of England. She is a single mother of a young daughter. At the age of 16, Beth moved out of home and into a hostel, following a relationship breakdown with her mum. Since then, they have had irregular and often negative contact, cycling in and out of contact during her studies. Other than her daughter, Beth has no contact with any other family members.

She chose to study at her university for three main reasons: she already lived in a rented flat close to campus; she was offered a variety of support for her disabilities; and she received an unconditional offer to study there. She attributed her interest in studying Law to her personal experiences of experiencing homelessness and family estrangement. Beth initially began her studies in 2018 but deferred for a year due to the struggles of caring for a newborn baby without family support, starting her studies again in 2019.

Beth took some breaks from writing diary entries in January 2021 and April 2021, but participated in both interviews and wrote a total of 1221 words across 5 diary entries.

7.1.2 Rhys

Rhys (he/him) is 19 years old and in his second year of a three-year Business degree at a Russell Group university in the North of England. After setting up his own business in sixth form, he was interested in studying Economics or Finance, but chose a degree with broader exposure to these topics that did not require an A-level in Maths. He chose to attend his university as he wanted to live in a new city that was still close to his family home, and because it had a well-respected business course.

His parents divorced at 14, after which he lived with his dad and lost contact over time with his mother. His dad's substance abuse and alcoholism following the divorce led to their relationship breaking down during his A-levels. Rhys lives with his grandparents in the holidays and has strong positive relationships with his siblings and extended family.

Rhys only participated in the first interview. He then contacted me in early 2021 to notify me of his withdrawal from future diaries and interviews, so that he could focus on his academic commitments. He did not withdraw the data from his first interview.

7.1.3 Priya

Priya (she/her) is 21 years old and is in her third year of a four-year joint-honours degree in an Asian language and Business at a Russell Group university in the North of England. She moved in with her aunt at a young age, and gradually lost contact with her parents over her childhood. During her studies, Priya maintains supportive relationships with her aunt and her grandmother.

When choosing her course, Priya was keen to do a degree that allowed her to do classes in subjects she enjoyed during school (Business at A-level, and the Asian language at GCSE), and her university was the only one that offered a combination with the structure she wanted. In her second year, she started her year abroad in Asia — however, this was cut short due to the pandemic, and she returned to the UK and continued her classes online in early 2021. Priya participated in both interviews and wrote 8 diary entries, totalling 3272 words.

7.1.4   Kate

Kate (she/her) is 21 years old and in her second year of a medicine-aligned course at a post-1992 university in the South of England. She had always wanted to be a doctor and previously applied to study medicine at a Russell Group university after finishing school, but cancelled this application and worked full-time for two years instead. With support from her godmother to find a medical field that best fit her interests, Kate chose to apply for her course instead at a university close by that she liked during the open day.

Kate has had a 'legal estrangement'[1] from both of her parents since the age of 15 when she entered local authority care and has had no contact with them since. She left the care system at age 17 but only received her formal care leaver status and entitlement to statutory support at age 21. She remains in contact with her siblings and her grandmother. Kate participated in all stages of the study, completing both interviews and writing 4268 words across 22 diary entries.

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[1]It is not clear exactly what Kate is referring to by 'legal estrangement', as UK law does not allow parents to voluntarily surrender their rights as she described in her narrative. Given her care experience, the closest fit seems to be a written agreement under the Children Act (1989), Section 20, which allows local authorities to provide 'voluntary accommodation' for children under the age of 18 when they have parental consent but no court order. However, this is a temporary agreement rather than a permanent surrender of parental rights (see template in Public Law Working Group, 2021, p. 23). I will continue to quote her words, using 'legal estrangement' rather than making assumptions about her experience.

7.1.5   Sophie

Sophie (she/her) is 21 years old studying in her second year of a three-year sociology degree at a new, small university in the North of England. She is emotionally estranged from both of her parents, having infrequent and very impersonal contact with them, and previously went a year without contacting her mother. She has limited contact with the rest of her biological and step family but is very close with her fiancé's family.

Sophie chose Sociology because it was her favourite subject at A-level, and chose her university as it was an affordable and accepting city to live in as a disabled trans woman. Sophie participated in both interviews and wrote 20 entries, totalling 2721 words.

7.1.6   Asha

Asha (she/her) is 19 years old and in her second year of a five-year medicine degree at a Russell Group university in the North of England. While there was a lot of pressure from her Indian Desi family to become a doctor, she was also personally interested in pursuing the profession. She chose a university that she was likely to get into with her A-level grades.

When she began university, Asha was still in contact with her parents and travelled home (in another local city) regularly to see them. However, their relationship was strained, and she described their behaviour as controlling and abusive, such as installing a tracking app on her phone. She cut contact with her parents in her first year of university during the pandemic and has had no contact with them since. Asha has no other relationships with family, other than some brief contact with two other estranged family members. Asha was involved in all stages of this research, participating in both interviews and writing 1742 words across 15 diary entries.

7.1.7   Dani

Dani (she/her) is 19 years old, in her second year of a three-year programme studying Primary Education at a new, small university in the North of England. She entered the care system aged 12 when her parents went to prison and stayed with one foster family until she went to university at 18. She has no contact with her parents or mum's side of the family but has close relationships with her dad's side. At the start of the study, Dani had no contact with her foster carers after being kicked out during the pandemic, but during the research re-established contact after her foster mother was diagnosed with health issues.

Her choice of course was driven by her personal experiences as a care leaver and estranged young person, describing a desire to support other disadvantaged young people as a teacher. Dani chose her university as she had wanted to attend it since childhood, and it was local to her. Dani participated in both interviews and wrote a total of 3975 words in 15 diary entries throughout the study.

7.1.8   Finn

Finn (they/them) is 25 years old, in their second year of a three-year degree studying criminology at a post-1992 university in the South of England. They previously started a product design degree at a northern post-1992 university but chose to drop out and move away to live with their partner. Finn enrolled at their current university near to their partner's home shortly after moving but paused their studies for health reasons. This time, they instead chose to study criminology following their curiosity and interest in the field.

Finn chose to cut contact with both parents after leaving home at 18. They continue to limit contact with their mother, though they receive unwanted contact fairly frequently. During their university studies, prior to and during the research, Finn is trying to reconcile and rebuild their relationship with their father. While they have

limited contact with extended family, they have strong relationships with their siblings who are still supported by their parents.

Finn participated in both interviews and wrote 6 diary entries with a total of 3023 words. They temporarily withdrew from the study and wrote no diaries after April 2021 to focus on academic and personal commitments.

7.1.9 Hollie

Hollie (she/her) is 20 years old, in her second year of a three-year Sport degree at a Russell Group university in the South of England. She chose a course which aligned with her personal interests and allowed her to continue her sports training during her studies and picked a university with a history of success in her sport.

Hollie initially lost contact with her dad after her parents divorced when she was a teenager and had unsuccessful attempts trying to reconcile with him since. She has tried to distance herself from her mother after she was kicked out from home at 15 but receives regular unwanted contact from her. She maintains a relationship with her aunt, who she lives with during the university holidays; and with her brother but has tensions with him due to his positive relationship with their mum.

She participated in her initial interview and wrote 913 words across 4 diaries between December 2020 and April 2021, but I then lost contact with her.

7.1.10 Nadia

Nadia (she/her) is 19 years old, in her second year of a three-year degree in Politics at a post-1992 university in the South of England. She did the first year of her course at a research-intensive university but chose to move to the same city as her boyfriend during lockdown. She was able to transfer to study the same course at her new institution, starting from year 2. Nadia was originally interested in studying Law, but she participated in a Politics summer school during her A-levels which she really enjoyed.

Her parents divorced when she was a small child, and she lost contact with her father. She had a happy childhood with her mum and younger sister, until her mum died when Nadia was 16. They then moved in with her maternal grandmother, but experienced abuse and an incredibly difficult relationship with her. When she started university, she moved out and cut contact with her grandmother. Early in her studies she received a lot of support from her aunt, but unfortunately her aunt died early in the pandemic. She maintains a strong relationship with her sister who moved out from their grandmother's house and into a foster family during the study.

Nadia participated in the first interview and wrote four diary entries totalling 1462 words between January and April 2021. After this point, she no longer responded to emails.

7.2   Understandings of estrangement

In the literature review, the conceptual complexity and diversity of lived experiences of estrangement was explored (see Chapter 3). However, in higher education policy, the notion of 'estrangement' has a complex and contradictory landscape. There is an inconsistent use of 'formal' definitions tied to physical estrangement which signifies a permanent lack of contact or support from family, and 'informal' definitions that allow students to self-identify as estranged while still placing significance on physical estrangements (see Chapter 4). The purpose of this section is to problematise the policy approach by discussing the diversity and fluidity in estrangement circumstances from the estranged students' narratives, as context to then explore the varied personal engagements with the term estrangement.

All the participating students had been granted estrangement status from Student Finance for their maintenance loans, but in their narratives, four of the participants described how their relationships with their parents deviated from the binary, as summarised in Table 7.1 on the following page.

Table 7.1: Summary of which participants experienced irreconcilable physical estrangement or cyclical estrangement from their parents

Irreconcilable	Cyclical
Rhys	Beth
Priya	Sophie
Kate	Dani (foster parents)
Asha	Finn
Dani (biological parents)	
Hollie	
Nadia	

Agllias (2017a) introduced the term 'cyclical estrangement' to describe family relationships which may fluctuate between different levels of physical and emotional estrangement, with variations over time in the frequency and quality of communication between family members. For Sophie and Finn, these cycles in and out of contact with their parents were often described in a passive way, such as having *"very on and off [...] very infrequent and very impersonal"* contact (Sophie, int 1). In contrast, for Beth, each cycle was characterised by a high-intensity temporal moments. In Beth's narrative, she shared how her estrangement with her mum had been fluctuating through cycles since she was 16 years old, including two major conflicts that occurred during the research project. During Christmas 2020, she wrote about how *"I agreed to meet my mum to see if we could fix anything and she attacked me"* (Beth, Jan21 diary), and in the summer of 2021 she shared how she *"spent a little bit of time at my mum's which was going well until like we had an argument"* (Beth, int 2). These experiences show how cyclical estrangement can coincide with estranged students' academic commitments and timelines, despite the positioning of estrangement as an experience in the past by higher education policies (Barnwell, 2024; Marvell & Child, 2023). The impacts that these potentially

traumatic personal events may have on estranged students' ability to succeed in their studies will be explored later in the chapter.

As well as undesirable cycles in estrangement, estranged students may undergo processes of reconciliation with the intention of rebuilding their relationship with their family. At the beginning of the study, Dani was physically estranged from her foster parents, but shared in her diaries how *"I have had a little contact with my foster family, I am speaking to my foster mother quite a bit due to her illness"* (Dani, Apr21 diary), and by the second interview Dani had restored her positive relationship with them. Moreover, throughout the study Finn described their active attempts of *"trying to bridge the gap with my dad, it's been a two-year long process of trying to reconnect and rekindle"* (Finn, int 1), and wrote diary updates about the ebbs and flows in their relationship. The definition of estrangement as a 'permanently irreconcilable' experience in the higher education sector does not just ignore these fluid lived experiences but actively discourage student agency in their relationships. Students who choose to reconnect with their family risk losing access to funding and support (Weale, 2018); even if their attempts to reintegrate with their family are unsuccessful, these policies conflate family contact with family support, demonstrating the influence that family ideology has in masking the fluid circumstances that estranged young people may have. Especially as Finn also reflected in their second interview that *"it's never too late to build those bridges back which I've found with my dad, which has been reassuring that things aren't permanently gone"* (Finn, int 2), this policing of students' family relationships by the state has concerning implications for individual agency.

These examples of estrangement circumstances that deviate from the higher education policies demonstrate the complexity in family relationships for estranged students. Estrangement as a widening participation characteristic in higher education is oversimplified and temporally static, yet this study has identified ways that students' relationships with their family may be positively or negatively fluctuating over time, coinciding with the academic calendar. Questions arise here of what should or should not be considered 'estrangement' in higher education for

the purposes of providing support to students, as even students who have contact with their family may not receive the socially expected material and emotional capitals from them (Scheinfeld & Worley, 2018).

7.2.1 Estrangement 'practices' during their studies

Although family estrangement is considered a static historical event for estranged students in higher education policy, the interdisciplinary literature on estrangement identified how it is often an ongoing 'process' (Scharp et al., 2015) that must be actively 'practised' (D. H. J. Morgan, 1996) and maintained over time. These elements also came out in the estranged students' narratives, who described the ways that they had to negotiate and maintain their physical estrangement from parents during their studies. Barnwell (2024) identified three categories of estrangement 'practices' (see Chapter 3), but the estranged students in this study exclusively focused on the ways that they dealt with reminders from and about their family.

For example, four of the students described reoccurring temporal moments where they reliably received unwanted contact from family members. These students had to manage their emotions and enforce their boundaries. Hollie was prepared to respond to unwanted contact from her mother on her birthday: *"she sent me a birthday card with a cheque in, so like I ripped it up and burnt it, you know because I don't want anything to do with her"* (Hollie, int 1). Furthermore, Finn and Beth both identified how Christmas *"is always the time when my family try to get back in touch"* (Beth, Jan21 diary), which was challenging to manage for Finn as they *"fell into the guilt trap and answered"* (Finn, Dec20 diary). These narratives highlight the ways that many estranged students are actively negotiating pressures from their own family, the social pressure for family unity, and their academic studies, which may result in temporal periods where support is critical for estranged students to maintain their progression through higher education.

Moreover, reminders *about* estranged family may occur during their studies. Higher education policy assumes that family-related conflicts or traumas are in the past for estranged students when irreconcilably estranged, but reminders of their past experiences may emerge at critical temporal moments. While preparing their exams in 2021, Asha and Dani were both involved in legal investigations related to their childhood experiences with their family. Managing their student commitments and personal emotions during this process was *"time consuming and stressful"* (Asha, May21 diary) for them, as Dani reflected on in particular:

> *"they had sent me a folder with all the information in it ready for the call going into detail about what happened to me and i am really struggling with it. Mainly due to the fact that i didn't know half of this stuff had happened to me. So hearing and reading this new information its broken me down [...] i am constantly on the verge of tears"* (Dani, May21 diary)

These perspectives echo a blog written by an estranged student at the University of Oxford, who wrote about how *"the pace of Oxford life meant that I had very little time to stop and gather my thoughts"* (Anonymous Oxford student, 2018). This coexistence of difficulties within estranged students' academic and personal timelines (Adam, 1990) may create overwhelmingly challenging moments for estranged students that are abnormal within the higher education 'field'. These findings emphasise the complex lens of disadvantage that may result from estranged students' personal lives in the institution, which will be explored throughout this thesis.

7.2.2   Engaging with the notion of 'estrangement'

So far, this chapter has explored the ways that estranged students' lived experiences of family estrangement can deviate from the assumptions made in higher education policy as a historical experience and 'struggle' that students face. However, even the term itself is one that estranged students may have a complex relationship with. Chapter 4 discussed the extent to which estranged students align their personal identity with the term 'estrangement', with some rejecting it due to its

stigmatised connotations (e.g. Costa et al., 2020b) while others embraced and reclaimed the term to celebrate their liberation from family (e.g. Minty et al., 2022). Moreover, in Chapter 3 I reviewed the broader literature on the topic of family estrangement that temporally conceptualises it as either a 'cut off' experienced in the past (e.g. Conti, 2015) or an ongoing 'process' that one is continuously engaging with (e.g. Scharp et al., 2015). This section will explore the diverse ways that the estranged students temporally engaged with the notion of 'estrangement' and being an 'estranged student' throughout their narratives, to explore their own identities and perspectives about the terms and statuses imposed upon them in research and policy.

Some of the students' temporal conceptions of estrangement aligned with higher education perspectives of it being a one-off event that occurred in their past (Carr et al., 2015). This was particularly so for students who had not had any contact with their parents in many years, such as Sophie's description of how she *"became estranged"* (Sophie, int 1), and Kate who described changes in her mental health as occurring *"pre-estrangement"* or *"post-estrangement"* (Kate, int 1). In contrast, in their diaries Hollie and Finn wrote about how *"being estranged"* (Hollie, Jan21 diary; Finn, Feb21 diary) impacted their student experience, echoing the conceptualisations of estrangement as a fluid 'practice' that they were actively navigating alongside their studies (Scharp et al., 2015). It is likely that this perspective was shaped by their regular management and use of 'practices' (Barnwell, 2024) to mediate unwanted contact from their family, as discussed earlier.

For the majority of students, the temporal circumstances of their estrangement were not something they actively engaged with, but many did reflect on the social connotations of, and extent to which they identified with, the term 'estrangement'. However, unlike the students in Costa et al. (2020b) who rejected the term due to its stigmatisation, many of the participants reflected on how their estrangement signified a personal strength of resilience and independence. For example, Hollie described the ways that *"being estranged from my parents and the abuse I endured*

has made me into the mature minded person I am today" (Hollie, Jan21 diary). Others found strength by actively rejecting the stigmatisation around their 'deviant' family experiences: after writing about her student experiences in a blog and receiving positive feedback, Kate wrote in her diary about how this positive reinforcement helped her to feel *"empowered to continue succeeding and defying what is expected of care experienced people"* (Kate, Feb21 diary). Moreover, when reflecting on how estrangement was seen as a barrier to succeeding in higher education after participating in a campus awareness campaign, Finn spoke about how *"it's super important that people know or people are aware that there's always options [of support], being estranged doesn't have to stop you from doing anything"* (Finn, int 1). These narratives carried a sentiment that estrangement was not a 'barrier' or a 'struggle', as it is often perceived in policy and discourse, but instead was a means through which they sought liberation and empowerment.

Others viewed their 'estrangement' status not as a personal identity, but as a tool that enabled them to access support. Y. Taylor and Costa (2019) identified how some estranged students view this label as a tool that provides practical utilities to access support. Indeed, Rhys referred to himself as *"technically estranged"* (Rhys, int 1), and viewed his estrangement status in higher education through its function to provide economic capitals that he could mobilise: *"it was there to be took and I took advantage of it, with the full intent to use it for its purpose"* (Rhys, int 1). Rather than a neutral term, estrangement for him had practical benefits that resulted in the university performing a 'function' of sharing its resources with him, just as family would. Hollie also described using 'estrangement' as a tool to seek emotional support and empathy from others, but shared how the effectiveness of this approach had reduced over time:

> *"when I was at school and stuff, I used it as an excuse to get out of stuff, like 'aw I've got no parents, oh this is why I'm acting out' [...] that was like survival mode. And then as you get older, nobody gives a shit do they? Like literally no one cares, just get on with your life. That was really hard for me to swallow last year"* (Hollie, int 1)

Hollie's engagement with her estrangement circumstances had changed as she transitioned into higher education, where being perceived as an 'adult' minimised the utility of estrangement as a label, regardless of the difficulties she was still facing. These narratives raise an important point around how non-traditional student labels can have positive and negative functions in higher education, and the agentic ways that individuals may utilise those labels to support themselves through their journey.

7.3   Understandings of family

Another significant notion that carries assumptions and weight tied closely to 'estrangement' is 'family'. Estranged students are positioned in higher education policy as studying without family contact or support from their family, with a 'lack' of access to family resources and support (Costa et al., 2020b). This section will explore how far the participants' own family conceptualisations aligned with or differed from this policy perspective from their reflections during their studies of how they made sense of 'family'.

7.3.1   Defining family

As I was analysing the data collected from previous waves during the study, I identified that some of the students would speak about 'family' in different ways. To consider this theme with their perspectives at the forefront, rather than falling into a 'language trap' (Bernardes, 1997) driven by implicit assumptions from myself and society about family, I invited the seven participants who participated in the final phase of the study to answer, *What does family mean to you?* Two core components made up their answers: definitions around family structure, and definitions around family practice.

Within British society, functionalist approaches to family have shaped a wider social and political discourse around the significance of the 'natural' family (Murdock, 1949) made up from permanent biological ties (Chambers, 2012), with common phrases such as *"blood is thicker than water"*. However, in their narratives around

family, many of the students explicitly rejected family ideology that privileged "blood" relations:

> *"it doesn't even have to do with blood"* (Finn, int 2)

> *"something that goes beyond blood relations. It's something that you create"* (Sophie, final diary)

> *"not everyone in the family is blood relatives, but that doesn't make them any less of a family"* (Kate, final diary)

For these students, family was something that could be structured in diverse, fluid, and individual ways. Rather than being stuck with their biologically assigned family who were problematic in their lives, estranged students actively restructured and recreated family for themselves, aligning with interpretivist approaches to family around the ability to create a 'family of choice' (Heaphy, 2016; Weeks et al., 1999). Indeed, many of the students shared stories of how they created their own family identity after their estrangement, which will be explored later in the chapter.

As well as considering family as defined through structure, many of the students also reflected on the role of 'practices' in their constructions of family. Countering the biological superiority of family, interpretivist scholars have reflected on the ways that family can be relationally constructed through interactions, or family 'practices' (D. H. J. Morgan, 2020). Chapter 3 explored familial practices that are commonly considered as constituting family within diverse relationship structures, such as the sharing of resources, a 'home', and quality communication. Such 'practices' were identified by the estranged students as determining family to them:

> *"Family are people you can always rely on"* (Priya, final diary)

> *"Family are those people who care for you and want the best for you. The people who want to see you succeed and are there for you when things Don't go to plan"* (Dani, final diary)

> *"the people who are there for you / look after you"* (Beth, final diary)

> *"the people you feel comfortable around, you spend time with"* (Asha, int 2)

In contrast to the structural permanence that is revered in family discourse, these estranged young people placed significance on emotive permanence. Qualities that may have been absent in their biological family relationships but expected from them, such as unconditional and reliable support, were important to them. These constructions of family as something that young people can recreate may problematise the definitions of estrangement in higher education: the presumption that only parents can provide familial support to young people, and thus that estranged students are 'lacking' family, forces a deficit and marginalised perspective onto these students who may be actively drawing support from alternative 'familial' sources. These aspects will be explored further in Chapter 9 around estranged students' engagement with support.

7.3.2   Re-constructing 'family' away from family of origin

In line with their conceptualisations of family as something that they could 'choose', some of the students described how they actively reconstructed family away from their biological relations during their studies. A common way that the students did this was by identifying other relationships as 'family'. For Hollie and Dani, their romantic relationships opened up opportunities to integrate into an existing family structure: Hollie reflected on how her relationship with her boyfriend's mother was *"like having a mum, it's great"* (Hollie, int 1), and in her answer to the family question, Dani answered *"my boyfriend and his family are family to me"* (Dani, final diary). This agency in applying the label of 'family' to relationships that held familial qualities

was also demonstrated in Sophie's answer, sharing that *"two (binary) trans people, who are my parent's age, and that I am close to, are my uncle and aunt for all purposes"* (Sophie, final diary). These narratives align with the concept of 'families of choice' (Weston, 1997; Weeks et al., 1999) and the ways that many young people, particularly those who are LGBTQ+ and have been rejected by their family of origin, resist the strength of ideology and realign the term 'family' to relationships that feel 'familial' (Heaphy, 2016; Parker & Mayock, 2019). These elements will be explored further in Chapter 10 in relation to how they provide support through their higher education journey.

As well as relationally shifting the term 'family' to apply to others, a novel way that some of the estranged students resisted the strength of family ideology was through renegotiating their own identity and using language to shift away from their biological family. As an example, when talking about her relationship with her brother, Hollie rejected the use of familial language to describe her mother: *"he goes and stays with [mother's name], our mum - I don't really like calling her mum, she doesn't deserve that title"* (Hollie, int 1). Bourdieu (1996) discussed how the social privilege of family is maintained through displays of family unity, including the use of shared family names and identities; Hollie's choice to actively reject the social language of family for someone who had harmed her was a small, but significant act of resistance to reconstruct family on her own terms. Moreover, instead of just shifting their use of language when referring to their parents, Finn and Kate had changed their names to distance from family, an active identity shift that further caused tension with their biological family. Finn legally changed their first name to match their gender identity and wrote in their diary about the negative reaction from their parents: *"my family aren't supportive of my name change, which is hard to deal with"* (Finn, Feb21 diary). Similarly, Kate reflected on the response to her decision to remove her last name and use her middle name as a surname instead:

> *"Since the estrangement from my family, I have felt that it is something I would like to permanently change my name to. However, I was told by my grandmother that in doing so I would be removed from my parents will [...] I would love to change it officially one day"* (Kate, Jun21 diary)

Thus, alongside navigating their higher education studies and engaging in identity formation into adulthood, these estranged students were also actively renegotiating their identities away from their biological relations. These experiences align with the way that many estranged people feel empowerment through their distance from family to create a 'differentiated self' (Agllias, 2017b) away from their traumatic histories.

7.3.3 Experiences of grief around the 'lack' of family

Though many of the estranged students held dynamic and fluid theoretical conceptualisations of family, and exhibited some agency in recreating family for themselves, the reality of engaging in a society which privileges family ideology led to moments where they described grieving an absence of family. These particularly arose when they reflected on the challenges of navigating higher education 'without' the family support that their peers had. For example, Beth reflected on how she often struggled with feeling that *"I don't have anyone to call ... you've got to rely on yourself totally"* (Beth, int 1). These narratives of grief were exacerbated during 'trigger dates' (L. Blake, 2017), temporal turning points on societal and personal calendars that had strong associations with family. On a personal level, Kate wrote diary entries about the emotional struggles she faced on her own birthday - *"I miss my family awfully, and birthdays always make me reflect on it more than usual"* (Kate, diary)[2] - and on her mother's birthday - *"Every year it sends a little regret through me as I always miss these events and celebrations [...] It can be quite a kick in the gut"* (Kate, diary)[2]. For Nadia, the widespread family-oriented holiday of Mother's Day raised challenges:

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[2]Diary month redacted for anonymity.

> *"I tried to ignore the fact that it was mother's day, it was just a normal Sunday but it was hard. People posting their mum's onto social media, thanking their mums for their support and love - and I don't have that anymore - it hurts so bad"* (Nadia, Mar21 diary)

These narratives resonate with what Agllias (2011) termed 'ambiguous loss', a common experience where estranged individuals mourn the 'normal' family relationships that they wished they could have and struggle to find a sense of closure on this loss. Estranged students who are surrounded by other young people at university who frequently 'display' a continued strong relationship with their families through language (Finch, 2007; Shannon, 2022) may feel these exacerbated further, as they are socially positioned as deviant for being unable to celebrate these events in 'normal' ways. This emerging theme of a sense of difference from those around them came up throughout their narratives in higher education and will be unpacked further in the following chapters.

7.4   Estrangement shaping higher education

Alongside their insights of how they engage with the notions of family and estrangement, the students who participated in this study identified ways that their higher education experiences were shaped by these backgrounds. Existing research and policy commonly frame estrangement as a past 'trauma' that resulted in a present absence of family, and the material barriers to access and success in higher education that come from this 'lack' of family (see Chapter 5). This framing will form the basis of discussion about estranged students' experiences in Chapter 8. However, rather than being a passive detail of their past, the participating students explicitly reflected on how their estrangement was actively shaping their higher education experiences over time. This final section will explore the ways that estranged students viewed their estrangement as impacting their mental health and decision-making within the university 'field', as well as ways that some viewed higher education as a source of freedom.

7.4.1   Mental health

A core way that their family and estrangement experiences shaped their student journeys was through mental health challenges. Experiences with mental health issues are increasingly prevalent throughout the general student population in the UK (Frampton & Smithies, 2022; Lewis & Bolton, 2024), but for estranged students these challenges are often exacerbated as a result of their estrangement histories. Common reasons for estrangement for young people include experiences of abuse or rejection from family members (Carr et al., 2015; Scharp et al., 2023), and becoming estranged in itself can be a traumatic experience (Dattilio & Nichols, 2011; Scharp, 2017). Furthermore, the 'silence' (Scharp, 2020) that surrounds family estrangement exacerbates societal stigmatisation around estrangement and can lead to internalised shame and embarrassment around their experiences (Agllias, 2017b; Wilson et al., 2022). Therefore, though there is increased awareness of mental health within higher education, the complex emotional histories that students may bring into their studies with them are little acknowledged and supported within the higher education sector.

Indeed, many of the participants disclosed a general history with mental health difficulties, with diagnoses and self-reported anxiety, depression, PTSD, eating disorders, and experiences of self-harm, as other studies with estranged students have commonly found (e.g. Marvell & Child, 2023; Minty et al., 2022). In their narratives about their mental health as a student, some of the students directly and explicitly attributed these conditions to their adverse childhood circumstances and family estrangement. For example, Asha wrote that *"the circumstances around my estrangement (my parents were abusive) has contributed to my depression"* (Asha, Dec20 diary). Similarly, Priya reflected on how the mental health struggles she faced during her studies were exacerbated by *"past trauma, effects from the lockdown, and family disputes"* (Priya, Sep21 diary). The ways that their mental health experiences were further exacerbated when navigating their student lives will be explored in Chapter 8.

Moreover, the longitudinal study enabled exploration of how estranged students navigated their mental health over time. Throughout their diaries, the students described significant temporal moments where they experienced high-intensity challenges with their personal mental health. For example, Kate shared her struggles with *"trauma related flashbacks and intrusive thoughts"* (Kate, Jun21 diary) and Priya described how *"I pretty much had a mental breakdown"* (Priya, Feb21 diary) at unpredictable moments. These challenges highlight the heavy weight of possibly traumatic histories carried into their studies that may destabilise their ability to prioritise their studies. However, such experiences were problematic within the higher education field, as Asha reflected on in her diary: *"Had a depressive episode a few days ago and was admitted to hospital. The uni wanted me to go home but where"* (Asha, Aug21 diary). When family ideology positions young people as able to draw upon the capitals of family during a crisis (Finch & Mason, 1993; Swartz et al., 2011), such assumptions in policy risk creating gaps in support at critical times.

On a broader scale, the pandemic also created challenging turning points where estranged students faced greater difficulties with their mental health. Existing research with estranged people has considered the ways that mental health challenges were exacerbated from concerns for their family's health and wellbeing, as well as increased isolation during lockdown (L. Blake et al., 2020). These aspects were echoed in the participants' narratives, as Finn and Nadia both described how lockdown aggravated their mental health so much that they experienced suicidal thoughts. However, as travel restrictions eased, Kate reflected on how *"my anxiety went a bit crazy during Covid, but whose wouldn't? [...] we were literally in the middle of a pandemic, I think I was a bit entitled to anxiety about that"* (Kate, int 2). This narrative suggests that the challenges with mental health stemming from estrangement were more justified due to wider, more 'normal', socioeconomic challenges at the time. As such, questions arise that if the stigmatisation that surrounds family estrangement in society were reduced, more recognition and support for the unique mental health circumstances faced by

estranged students may be granted which could remove barriers to access and participation in higher education.

7.4.2   Academic decision-making

Additionally, a novel insight that arose from this study was the ways that family and estrangement experiences could shape estranged students' academic interests and decisions. The marketised higher education system in the UK that views its students as consumers (Fisher et al., 2016; McCaig & Squire, 2022) has encouraged a broader field of research that explores the decision-making processes that non-traditional students make throughout their access to and participation in higher education (e.g. Baker, 2020; Holton, 2018; O'Sullivan et al., 2019). While these aspects have been little considered for estranged students, some of the participants in this study explicitly reflected on how their estrangement circumstances shaped major and micro higher education decisions.

One major higher education decision that was shaped by their family and estrangement circumstances was their choice of degree to study. As part of the initial questions in their first interview, all the participants were asked why they chose to study their course. While most were driven by their interest in the content or in the career opportunities it opened, two of the students explicitly identified how it was shaped by their personal history. Beth's interest in Law was *"cos of my personal experiences"* (Beth, int 1), while Dani chose to study Primary Education because of the support a teacher gave her:

> *"[choice of course] stems off my experience as a child and being an estranged student cause when I was, well from about the age of 6 things that had happened to me as a child, and I had one teacher that I could go to and talk about everything when I was in primary school and I always thought like, I wanted to be that person but for another child [...] my goal is to help at least one child have a better experience in life, so I thought you know what, why not become a primary school teacher and do it as a job"* (Dani, int 1)

Thus, estranged students may position higher education study as an opportunity to utilise their personal traumas or challenges in the past to simultaneously give themselves and others a brighter future. Rather than being positioned in a continuous sense of 'struggle' that is imposed upon them in policy, estranged students are oriented towards a hopeful future. This is a theme that will be explored in more depth throughout the upcoming chapters.

Furthermore, this study identified how their estrangement circumstances shaped micro decisions within their academic studies. For Sophie and Finn, when choosing topics to write assignments on they gravitated towards things that aligned with their past experiences or identities. As Sophie began her reading for her final dissertation project in her Sociology degree, she wrote about how it *"has been interesting though quite intense, as lots of it relates to various forms of trauma, plenty of which I can relate to and/or empathise with"* (Sophie, Jul21 diary). Similarly, Finn reflected on how *"no doubt the topics I pick I at uni to write about is heavily influenced by the lack of support from my family in my life, especially when it comes down to being LGBT, disabled, and different to the rest of my family"* (Finn, Feb21 diary). From these narratives, the ways that university provided opportunities for these students to academically explore topics that are personally meaningful to them and make sense of themselves and their experiences in creative ways, are emphasised. This was facilitated by their degrees in social sciences, which may be less possible in other disciplines.

7.4.3   Liberation from family through higher education

A final significant theme that emerged in two students' narratives was the ways that university could provide a route for emotionally estranged young people to initiate estrangement and experience liberation from their family. As explored in Chapter 3, despite the stigma and challenges that family estrangement can bring, it is often described as a positive response to detrimental family situations and improves their emotional wellbeing (L. Blake et al., 2015; Linden & Sillence, 2021). Similarly, while university is socially considered a 'rite of passage' for young people

in their transition from childhood to adulthood (Waithaka, 2014), it can also provide emotionally estranged young people with an opportunity to 'escape' challenging home environments (Sinko et al., 2022).

This was the case for Nadia, who shared how *"I knew ... within the first month [of living with her grandmother] that I didn't wanna be there anymore, and we were in touch with social services and they didn't really do anything for us ... so my one opportunity was moving to uni"* (Nadia, int 1). Indeed, once she began her studies, she described how she felt:

> *"a state of euphoria because I was away from my abusive family and I finally felt like a sense of freedom, and I think that reflected in my studies and I was doing really really well"* (Nadia, int 1)

A similar trajectory was shared by Asha in her first interview, who did not become physically estranged from her family until halfway through her first year. Even when she still had a relationship with her family, higher education provided her with some respite: *"they were quite controlling, like they put a tracking app in my phone and they were ringing me and stuff all the time [...] but cuz I wasn't at home it felt like more freedom"* (Asha, int 1); and once she had cut contact, she reflected about how it had *"been quite nice to have that like freedom and independence"* (Asha, int 1). These narratives align with those shared by other estranged students in previous research in how family estrangement can be a means for personal liberation (Key, 2019; McRae, 2023; Minty et al., 2022), showing the unique benefits in accessing higher education that estranged students may have.

However, current widening participation support initiatives for estranged students only apply to students who have experienced physical estrangement from their parents. Emotionally estranged young people may feel unable to cut contact with their family until they have the 'safety net' of higher education, but these prospective students face similar barriers to physically estranged students in their transition to university. This creates a situation where these young people must

navigate the process of applying to university without any of the support offered to more-visible estranged students, falling through the gaps as a result.

7.5   Conclusion

This chapter introduced the ten estranged students who participated in this research. Their unique backstories highlight the fluidity and heterogeneity of estrangement in higher education.

Despite the higher education sector's assumptions that estrangement is an event in students' past, the participants spoke in depth about their active estrangement 'practices' (Barnwell, 2024) and the way those practices impacted their studies. Societally familial periods such as Christmas and Mother's Day were common 'trigger dates' that necessitated the maintenance of their estrangement, but participants also spoke about personal periods of familial disruption.   The participants did not align with the deficit model of having an 'absence' of family, instead redefining family in fluid, individual ways. Their narratives identified others who they structurally considered as family beyond 'blood' relations, and who performed the familial 'practices' described in Chapter 3. Family and estrangement experiences directly shaped their university experiences through their mental health and academic decision-making.   The estranged students described how higher education was not exclusively experienced as a problem, but offered a means of liberation from the harmful family 'field'. Overall, these narratives highlight the need for higher education policies to move past the extreme formal definition of estrangement as studying with *no* support.

With these narratives of family and estrangement in mind, the next chapter will explore their day-to-day experiences of higher education as an estranged student.

CHAPTER 8 ⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯⎯

NAVIGATING UNIVERSITY LIFE

Chapter 7 explored the ways that estranged students made sense of the interactions between estrangement, family, and their higher education journeys. This chapter will explore the participants' narratives of their student experiences to answer the second research question: *What are the significant experiences for estranged students across the academic year and holidays?*

The longitudinal design of this study meant that a wealth of data around estranged students' experiences of higher education was captured, and it is impossible to discuss every significant moment from their narratives. This chapter therefore focuses on the unique ways that their student experiences were shaped by family estrangement. This includes how the participants navigated common student 'challenges' or events in novel ways due to their family circumstances, in addition to how they tackled challenges unique to estranged students. Within each theme, diversity in experiences will be discussed, including the ways that estrangement can intersect with other 'disadvantaged' student characteristics, to critically reject the common homogenisation and deficit perspectives.

Much of the existing research with estranged students cross-sectionally explores their experiences of university within three core domains: finance, accommodation, and mental health (e.g. Bland, 2018; Costa et al., 2020a; Spacey & Sanderson, 2021, see Chapter 5 for a review of this literature). This study aimed to expand the current knowledge base and add a nuanced perspective, exploring how estranged students' experiences change over time, and identifying significant moments for estranged students throughout the academic year and holidays.

The focus of this chapter is on four experiential domains that were significant in their narratives, presented from most to least frequently discussed: academics, finances, housing, and holidays. Despite being neatly categorised in this chapter, in reality these domains are experienced as a complex interwoven web. Moreover, while the focus of this chapter is on their experiences to address the second research question, the discussion will lightly overlap with the other two research questions regarding their engagement with support or experiences of family and estrangement.

8.1 Navigating academic spaces

The first experiential domain to be explored is how estranged students navigate their academic studies over time. At present, this is an under-explored area of inquiry. Existing exploratory studies on estranged students' experiences in higher education have paid particular attention to how their 'lack' of family economic capital adds emotional pressures or practical barriers that may detract from their ability to focus on their academic work, such as anxieties around finding housing and the need to take up part-time work to survive (e.g. Bland, 2018; Costa et al., 2020a), but not academic experiences themselves. Quantitative understandings of estranged students' experiences of learning and teaching overall will become available soon, following the recent inclusion of estrangement status onto the NSS, but these figures will provide an overall retrospective of their studies and will not identify moments of significance throughout. In contrast, the narrative exploratory design of this study enabled the participating students to discuss significant moments as they happened throughout their university experience. As *students*, their narratives focused strongly on how they engaged with classes, assessments, and placements within the academic 'field' (Bourdieu, 1977). There were three primary themes across their narratives about the significant aspects of their academic studies, which will be discussed in turn: feelings of academic belonging; balancing academic and personal time; and engagement with extracurricular activities.

8.1.1   Feelings of academic belonging

A core theme that arose in the estranged students' narratives of university life were variations in how far they felt rejection or belonging in academic spaces.   As introduced in Chapter 4, higher education research has explored the ways that many students who hold widening participation characteristics feel as though they do not belong at university or feel like a 'fish out of water' (Reay et al., 2009) when their non-traditional student habitus does not neatly 'fit in' within the higher education 'field' (e.g.   Burnell, 2015; Marshall, 2016; Crozier et al., 2019). Estranged students' lower continuation and progression rates compared to non-estranged students (see Figure 4.1 on page 70) may stem from this reduced sense of belonging in academia.   While much research on student belonging has focused on the major transitions into and out of higher education (e.g. Meehan & Howells, 2019; Thomas, 2012), the temporal framing of this research in the middle of estranged students' degrees enabled exploration of how there may be temporal moments where students' sense of 'belonging' is enhanced or challenged within academic spaces during their studies.

For example, feelings of belonging in academia can be uniquely reduced when estranged students are culturally expected to draw upon family support. Beth and Finn identified temporal moments where this was most prominent during educational transitions and celebratory milestones. For example, Beth recalled how she chose not to attend multiple events at her university because they tied academic achievement to family. In her first interview, she shared how her course's induction week *"wasn't a week I wanted to be a part of because that's usually when students are sharing kind of their backgrounds and how they came to be at uni, and I think that kind of isolated me a bit"* (Beth, int 1). She also chose not to attend a graduation-like celebration event at the end of her first year as students' families were invited to attend.   This offers an example of how institutions and university culture make assumptions that all students have access to family support during core transition moments and take 'family discourse' (Bourdieu, 1996) for granted, subsequently discouraging the attendance of estranged students who feel

excluded. The unnecessary application of 'family' meant that she lost access to the institutional spaces that could otherwise enable her to celebrate academic accomplishments with her peers and enact a strong sense of belonging. Beth's experiences align with those found in the wider field of research on family estrangement, where some choose to actively avoid familial events like weddings where their estrangement risks becoming 'visible' and open to scrutiny (Agllias, 2017b).

As well as coming from formal institutional events, expectations of family support during academic milestones also came implicitly. A significant example of this came from Finn when they reflected on how they struggled to celebrate their academic results compared to their peers: *"I'm trying to be proud of my results so far, they've been better than last year, my friends share their celebrations with their family, I can't do that"* (Finn, Feb21 diary). Finn's narrative shows how there are multiple 'micro-moments' where estranged students may experience rejection when family is assumed and taken-for-granted within the higher education space and by other students, not just at the main transitions at the start or end of an academic year. Some studies have explored how these relational 'micro-moments' between students and their peers or teachers can enhance feelings of belonging for students in the classroom (e.g. Ajjawi et al., 2024). However, these findings with estranged students highlight how there can also be 'micro-moments' that reject and push a 'deviant' positionality (Boddy, 2019) onto students with non-traditional family relationships.

The rejection that non-traditional students can experience in the academic 'field' may be exacerbated further for estranged students by their personal experiences of family estrangement. For example, Beth had one of her second year exams changed due to her disability, but she received a significantly lower than expected grade after it was marked by a staff member who was unaware of this change. In her second interview, she spoke about how she navigated appealing this grade on her own during the summer holiday, and why her grades were particularly important to her:

> *"something that I struggle with because of my background, as in like being homeless and stuff [...] I've got a touch of imposter syndrome, so you know I never ever think that I'm good enough. When I get an A grade I'm like, I really don't understand how. And I like said to my teacher when all this was going on [...] like this is just adding to it because you're basically telling me I'm not good enough but not telling me why"* (Beth, int 2)

Beth attributed her past experiences to the present feelings of academic 'imposter syndrome', a term that denotes a sense of feeling inadequate, fraudulent, and that she does not belong (Breeze et al., 2022). Sociologists have explored how imposter syndrome can be particularly exacerbated for students from backgrounds whose habitus place them at academic 'disadvantage', such as first-generation students or those from marginalised classed or racial backgrounds (Hewertson & Tissa, 2022). Moreover, it is often framed in the higher education sector as an individual issue that universities can help to 'fix' through confidence workshops or wellbeing support (Addison & Stephens Griffin, 2022; Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009). However, there is a risk that universities assume students experience academic imposter syndrome exclusively as a result of feeling academically unconfident, yet Beth identified how her academic doubt was intricately tied up with her unique personal history and traumas from her estrangement, and not 'feeling good enough' for her family. As such, Beth and other estranged students may experience a complex, 'misrecognised' (Fraser, 2007; Marvell & Child, 2023) form of imposterism at university, which may continue to reduce feelings of belonging further when the traditional methods of 'fixing' it do not work.

Although Beth and Finn described multiple temporal moments where they felt rejected in academia, only a minority of participants in this study felt an overwhelming sense of 'struggle' to belong within the academic field. In their narratives, most of the estranged students positively reflected on their studies and how they were developing a sense of belonging with their studies. For example, Rhys and Sophie described their degree programmes as *"enjoyable"* (Rhys, int 1) and *"interesting"* (Sophie, Aug21 diary), and even Finn proclaimed that *"I didn't think I'd like [the course] this much"* (Finn, int 1). Once Nadia moved to her new

university and transitioned into a new academic space, she felt that she *"snapped back into it and started doing so much better again"* (Nadia, int 1). As well as enjoying and succeeding in their degree, academic belonging facilitated overall personal growth and development. Throughout her diaries, Kate reflected positively on how her hospital placements increased her overall confidence, writing that *"I'm feeling over the moon, my confidence has increased tenfold and I finally feel autonomous"* (Kate, Jan21 diary). These experiences echo the discussions in Chapter 7 of how pursuing higher education can offer a space which enables empowerment for estranged young people; not just to explore their intellectual interests, but for a personal sense of 'autonomy' and development which they may not have felt within their families. As such, estranged students do not experience feelings of being a 'fish out of water' (Reay et al., 2009) in the academic space as much as other non-traditional student groups, but perhaps these positive experiences lead them to feel a greater affinity and belonging within education than they do in their 'family field' (Atkinson, 2014).

Building on this notion, a novel perspective of how estranged students can feel a strong sense of 'belonging' within academia arose in Nadia's narrative. In Chapter 7, the ways that higher education was commonly seen as a route to 'freedom' for students to 'escape' from challenging family backgrounds was explored, and Nadia reflected further on how this applied to her with academic work more specifically:

> *"Academics has always been the thing I've thrown myself into, its consistent, its always there. Even while living in an abusive home, I just tried my best to finish my A-levels so I could go to university. Maybe that was the drive that I now dont have anymore. Maybe fear used to be my motivation and now that I no longer fear anything, I have no reason to work anymore. Maybe its just a slump and im reading into it too much"* (Nadia, Mar21 diary)

In her exploration of the role academics played on her motivation levels, she brings forward an important perspective of how academic work may be a 'safety net' for estranged students in itself. While entering higher education can provide a long-term route to 'safety' for emotionally estranged young people (see 7.4.3),

Nadia's story highlights how estranged students may then find it challenging to continue to use education as a motivator once in that 'safe' place. Existing research with estranged students usually applies the term 'safety net' when discussing how estranged students 'lack' one provided by their family that most non-estranged students have access to (e.g. Costa et al., 2020a; Spacey & Sanderson, 2021). However, the positioning of learning and academics as a 'safety net' means that it is even more vital that universities do what they can to support estranged students into, through, and beyond higher education and facilitate them to succeed, in a similar way to how 'family' is expected to.

8.1.2 Balancing academic and personal time

Managing the demands of academic workloads with other aspects of student life can be challenging for any student, but estranged students may find simultaneously balancing their ongoing personal family and estrangement circumstances with their degree a challenge. This may be particularly challenging when personal events coincide with assessment periods and students were stretched thinner. A core example comes from Nadia's narrative, wherein she shared two significant personal moments in her first and second year that impacted her ability to complete her academic assignments:

> *"when my aunt passed away [during the pandemic] that's when everything sort of, I started slacking I missed I think four different deadlines and then I had to sit those in the summer, and throughout that last term I really really struggled"* (Nadia, int 1)

> *"My sister finally got moved out of our abusive grandmother's home and into foster care last week and it was one of the biggest reliefs i've felt in my entire life [...] I've been so preoccupied with my sister moving and other smaller things going on in my life that I just couldn't pay attention to anything. Deadlines are coming close and I still dont have the motivation to do anything"* (Nadia, Mar21 diary)

While any student can experience grief or significant changes in their family lives during their studies, these events may have a greater impact for estranged students who have fewer, or less consistent, emotional support resources to draw upon than non-estranged students who frequently rely on their family (Bland & Stevenson, 2018). Nadia's narrative echoes sentiments from a blog written by an Anonymous Oxford student (2018) about how the intense *"pace"* of university life can make it challenging to manage personal traumas (see Chapter 5), except Nadia prioritised the personal over academic. These examples emphasise how academic time is designed with the assumption that it is the priority for students, ignoring the implications for those who are simultaneously navigating significant events in their personal calendars (Adam, 1990), and demonstrates another way that family ideology and its assumptions permeate into higher education structures.

In response to her extenuating personal circumstances, Nadia's university allowed her to defer her assignments to the summer, a common response that enables students to complete their academic responsibilities at a later date. While this is seen as a convenient way to remove pressures in the short-term, for estranged students this *push back* to the summer holiday may cause a unique confluence of disadvantages. Throughout this chapter, the summer holiday will often be identified as a temporal period of instability for estranged students, stemming from the abrupt end to academic time: maintenance loan payments stop, accommodation contracts end, other students 'go home' to their families, and campuses often close (see Marvell & Child, 2023; Minty et al., 2022). Therefore, academics continuing into the summer may heighten the pressures placed on estranged students. This was the case for Dani, who deferred her exams to the summer during the study because the 'normal' exam period coincided with a challenging police case tied to her family circumstances. In her diaries at the time of her resits, she wrote about how she *"just wasn't in the mood [...] I am very disappointed in myself"* (Dani, Aug21 diary). Reflecting back on these moments in her second interview, she attributed her challenges to how *"I didn't have the motivation of everyone else doing it at the same time"* (Dani, int 2). Despite the support provided by her university to not do exams when she was preoccupied in her personal life, Dani's story highlights how

estranged students may be further disadvantaged by this when they are unable to draw upon the support from fellow students experiencing these academically challenging moments together. This peer solidarity is particularly vital for estranged students who may not have the same ability to draw upon emotional family capitals during these challenging periods (Costa et al., 2020a). Indeed, for estranged students who view academics as their route to safety or empowerment away from their family, and who are orientated towards the future to achieve this, the decision to push their assessments 'back' into an already challenging period can stall their sense of progress towards their goals.

Balancing personal events with the academic calendar was further exacerbated for estranged students who intersected with multiple widening participation characteristics. For example, Priya's dyslexia impacted her work as she needed to put in additional time to complete her assignments and still received lower grades than she hoped, sharing how this *"puts me in a very pessimistic mindsights as I write as no matter how detailed I am in essays I am never able to get 70 or above"* (Priya, Apr21 diary). For Beth, *"being a mum came first"* (Beth, int 2), prioritising parenthood over her academics. Throughout her diaries, she wrote extensively about different time management strategies she had attempted during her studies so far, and in her final interview shared concerns around how she would complete her upcoming dissertation that required more independent study: *"I'm really gonna have to nail time management this year"* (Beth, int 2). These experiences echo those found in studies with disabled (e.g. Reed & Kennett, 2017) and mature students (e.g. Hayman et al., 2024) that find a theme of struggle to balance personal and academic responsibilities for non-traditional students. However, these findings highlight how the estranged students did not just experience these challenges in the present, but were anticipating future challenges and had to personally prepare for their reoccurrence in the future.

8.1.3   Engagement with extracurricular activities

A novel contribution of this research was exploring how estranged students engaged with extracurricular activities. Extracurricular activities are heralded as an

important part of the UK higher education student experience by offering opportunities to enhance their engagement in interests and prepare themselves further for their career aspirations, which is particularly important to set oneself ahead of the competition in a neoliberal society (V. Burke et al., 2005; Thompson et al., 2013). These activities are primarily perceived as being campus-based, such as taking up student representative roles or participating in student-led societies within the institution (e.g. Clegg et al., 2010; Hordósy & Clark, 2018), but the scope of extracurricular activities can span beyond the institution, including external learning or volunteering opportunities.

Some research has explored how non-traditional students commonly struggle to engage in extracurricular activities at university due to the common need for additional economic capital to participate, furthering inequalities in access to post-graduate careers (Stuart et al., 2011). So far, there has been no research exploring how estranged students engage with extracurricular activities, other than theorising that the financial challenges faced by estranged students may prevent their ability to participate in the wider student experience (see Costa et al., 2020a). In contrast to this presumption of estranged students' inability to participate, this study found that most of the estranged students did engage in different extracurricular activities within and beyond their institution. Table 8.1 on the following page provides a summary of the types of extracurricular activities each participant was involved with.

Overall, engagement with extracurricular activities offered estranged students the opportunity to build strong friendships with others who share their interests and provided experience with their academic or career interests. As such, involvement with extracurricular activities can help to reduce the inequalities that estranged students may face during their higher education studies when preparing for their futures (Thompson et al., 2013).

However, the challenges with accessing extracurricular activities for estranged students hypothesised by Costa et al. (2020a) were described by some of the

Table 8.1: The types of extracurricular activities that each student participated in

	Institutional			External	
	Student representation	**Running a society**	**Participating in societies**	**Academic or vocational skills courses**	**Volunteering**
Beth				✓	✓
Rhys	✓	✓	✓		
Priya		✓	✓		
Kate			✓	✓	
Sophie		✓	✓	✓	
Asha					
Dani		✓	✓		✓
Finn	✓				✓
Hollie			✓	✓	✓
Nadia			✓		

participants in this research. For example, adding extracurriculars into the balancing act between academic and personal calendars risked exacerbating pressures on estranged students, which prevented Beth, Finn, and Priya from engaging in all the activities they wanted to during their studies. Moreover, changes to how student societies ran during the pandemic made joining them unappealing to Asha and Nadia: *"yoga on Zoom is not gonna be fun for me so there's no point"* (Nadia, int 1). Further exploration of how estranged students engage with extracurricular activities and barriers to participation would be beneficial in future research.

While challenging to access, one interesting insight that arose from estranged students' narratives was the drive to engage in extracurricular activities inspired by their personal experiences of inequalities that had a wider social impact. For example, Beth was involved in disability activism within the Law field, which stemmed from her difficulties navigating ableism during her studies:

> *"it's so disheartening to see [ableist narratives on social media] because it makes you feel like you don't belong in the profession because you're not someone who can get out of bed everyday"* (Beth, int 2)

Her narrative echoes the accounts of eight disabled students in Peruzzo and Raaper (2024) whose personal experiences of encountering ableism led them to be involved in political and community activism. Similarly, Dani spoke in depth during the study about her volunteering in the foster care system, sharing how *"This really helps me to reach my life goal of helping at least one child have a better childhood and a better experience of the foster care system."* (Dani, Apr21 diary). These narratives counter the assumptions that estranged students are situated in an experience of 'struggle' and isolation within the higher education sector, instead highlighting how students are motivated to use their spare time to mobilise their larger interests in social justice and equality. For estranged students, higher education is a way to be socially mobile not just in an economic sense for social mobility, but with mindful and compassionate consideration of the wider systems they operate within. Their

personal experiences with family estrangement and being positioned as 'other' in an unequal society situated them not solely in a traditionally short-term student experience but spurred them to look ahead towards a better future for themselves and their communities in unique ways.

8.2   Navigating finances

While a substantial proportion of the estranged students' narratives focused on their academic experiences, the participants also frequently discussed their higher education experiences beyond the classroom with material aspects, such as the ways they navigated their finances. Chapter 5 explored how the core of existing research with estranged students has been interested in financial 'struggle', considering the ways that estranged students face difficulties in accessing funds and surviving on a limited budget without being able to draw on the economic capital from their families (e.g. Bland & Blake, 2020; Costa et al., 2020a). The longitudinal lens of this study enabled the identification of a core temporal theme around how estranged students engaged with their finances: the participating students were not solely 'struggling' with their finances in the present but actively looking ahead to the future and planning as a means of survival. While challenging financial experiences were prominent in many of the students' narratives, there was diversity across the participants and this will be explored to begin to break down the 'deficit discourse' (Marvell & Child, 2023, p. 100) currently imposed upon estranged students in higher education. Financial experiences will be explored chronologically in their student journey, considering the shortfalls with the core financial source of Student Finance before illustrating how they narrated their day-to-day student lives on these funds.

8.2.1   Navigating the process to access Student Finance

All participants in this research successfully navigated through the process of applying for a maintenance loan as an independent student from SFE. As explored in Chapter 4, rather than going through the standard process of submitting evidence of their parents' income, independent students instead submit 'proof' of their estrangement or care experienced status to receive the maximum maintenance loan. Two of the participants, Finn and Priya, described the significant practical and emotional difficulties they faced when needing to 'prove' their estrangement status in their first interviews.   For example, Finn shared their confusion around how they were supposed to acquire 'proof' of their estrangement: *"how do you put that down on paper, how do you record that you don't get any support from your family?"* (Finn, int 1). This raises a core issue around the need to 'prove' an *absence* of support, especially when legal documentation of emancipation or care experience is unavailable (Minty et al., 2022). Moreover, the binary between physical and emotional estrangement (see Agllias, 2017a) is simplistically clear in higher education policy: emotional estrangement is deemed unworthy of support. However, for Finn who described cycles in and out of contact with their parents but received no financial support, their estrangement circumstances were more complex. Thus, the 'harsh binary' (S. Blake, 2023) of estrangement imposed by SFE may make it harder in practice for students to access significant financial support that enables them to survive while studying.

While Finn was able to easily acquire an evidence letter from their GP, Priya described an emotional toll that acquiring evidence from a professional had:

> *"obviously I feel like me as an estranged student as well as other estranged students, we're not just going around telling people we're estranged and able to get that [evidence], so that was kind of a struggle for me in order to get that kind of document: I was able to get from my school, but again I had to kind of tell this random person"* (Priya, int 1)

Priya's 'struggle' to access this evidence mirrors findings from previous studies with how estranged people commonly face challenges when disclosing their experiences of family estrangement with people they are unfamiliar with, and that the risks of being judged by others can make the process distressing (e.g. Key, 2019; Scharp & Thomas, 2016). In particular, her emphasis on how estranged students are *"not just going around telling people we're estranged"* highlights the strain that social stigmatisation of estrangement can have on young people, who are required to put themselves under scrutiny in order to source economic capitals they need to survive during their studies (Costa et al., 2020b). The need to have their accounts affirmed by a trusted professional, rather than having their own voice listened to and believed by finance systems, raises poststructuralist concerns around how estranged students must be monitored to prevent widespread disorder (or fraud, see Weale, 2018) due to their deviant positionality within social discourses around family (Bourdieu, 1996; Hugman, 2022).

These threats to psychological safety from the need to disclose were so significant for Priya that she chose not to reapply for the SFE maintenance loan in her final year, despite it being a major source of economic capital for estranged students. Reflecting on this decision in her second interview, she said:

> *"sometimes you get someone that's like 'okay I'll confirm it', but then sometimes you get somebody that wants to know the whole details about why and stuff like that and I just feel that's unnecessary, you don't need to know why I'm estranged from my family [...] so I just decided that I wouldn't do it [...] I factored that in as well for last year because I planned not to do it last year, so I saved up enough money to basically live without it this year"*
> (Priya, int 2)

The individual burden placed upon Priya to repeatedly provide evidence each year, and inconsistencies in how her request was handled by professionals, led to this decision to lose access to her primary source of funding. This choice was one that she had planned for in advance after weighing up the pros and cons of repeating an intense and possibly traumatic process of disclosing estrangement (Hank,

2024).   This is a significant example of a core theme that emerged in the participants' narratives about how estranged students must be temporally orientated towards the future to prevent financial destitution and to ensure their survival through the remainder of their studies. As such, estranged students must make financial decisions that differ substantially from the shorter-term financial considerations of most non-estranged students who can draw upon the economic capitals and 'safety net' of family when there are gaps in statutory funding (Spacey & Sanderson, 2021; Scheinfeld & Worley, 2018).

Priya's decision to not apply for an SFE maintenance loan is one little explored in the existing literature on estranged students. This is likely due to the prioritisation of formally defined estranged students (whose status is granted by their successful Student Finance application as an independent student) in policy and previous studies, rather than those who self-identify as estranged. However, there may be major implications from this decision: as SLC 'estranged student' status is the primary tool of identification on institutional and national levels to understand the estranged student population in higher education, students like Priya fall through the cracks and are not accounted for. Moreover, many universities use lists of estranged students sent by SLC to provide institutional support, particularly financial support. Though the research ended before this could be seen, Priya may have lost her entitlement to other support mechanisms at her institution in her final year. These significant risks to losing student support highlights the necessity for the sector to move away from SLC identification as the primary means of determining estrangement status in higher education, and a need for SFE policies to be reformed to remove the burden placed upon students when seeking support.

Interestingly, while these challenges in accessing SLC maintenance loans as an estranged student highlight a major narrative of 'struggle' for two of the participants, it was not as significant a theme in this study as it has been in other qualitative work with estranged students (see Chapter 5). The design of this study enabled the estranged students to narrate the most significant elements of their university experience, and the fact that Student Finance was only discussed by a few

participants suggests that the process was simple for the others, and may indicate that there have been significant improvements in the system. However, the continuing presence of these challenges when navigating the 'proof' bureaucracy of SFE and making decisions to not apply for funding highlights that issues remain in the statutory finance system which affect estranged students in disproportionate ways compared to those who do have contact with and support from their families.

8.2.2   Managing the costs of student life

Although challenges in accessing Student Finance were less prominent for the participants of this research than in earlier studies, issues with affording student life were more frequently described. There has been an increasing trend in the general student population of struggling to afford student life solely from their SLC maintenance loan, and the socioeconomic context of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis exacerbated these elements further as costs increased and part-time work opportunities decreased (L. Brown, 2023; Open Data Institute, 2023; Parrott, 2020a). For estranged students, these aspects are even more challenging, as Beth aptly put in her first interview: *"you don't have any kind of family support in terms of finances, you wholeheartedly rely on Student Finance"* (Beth, int 1). Especially as the statutory finance support they are reliant on is designed to top-up the resources from family in term-time only (Antonucci, 2016), estranged students who do not have access to economic capital from their family are positioned as disadvantaged.

One core issue the participants shared was with the timings of Student Finance payments. As the system is designed with an assumption that students only need to cover the costs of student life within term-time, payments are sent in three instalments at the beginning of each academic term. However, as estranged students are reliant on these funds through the calendar year rather than just during the academic year, there are temporal periods characterised by feelings of financial insecurity. For example, in her first interview Hollie shared her maintenance loan and institutional bursary payment schedule and highlighted

temporal moments where *"I struggle the most because I don't get anything"* (Hollie, int 1): halfway through her first semester and the summer holiday. She expressed a need to be *"really smart with it so I have enough money"* (Hollie, int 1). These reoccurring moments in time where managing finances became challenging were echoed by the other participants, particularly during the holidays. In their diary entries, Finn reflected on their financial challenges over Christmas: *"the last couple of days were a stretch"* (Finn, Jan21 diary), and in the summer: *"Financially seems to be hardest over Summer as I am disabled and can't find work"* (Finn, Aug21 diary). While the holidays have been identified in previous studies as a period of intense financial difficulty (e.g. Bhattacharya & Payne, 2024; Bland, 2015), this longitudinal study enabled the exploration of how estranged students had to prepare in advance for these predictable financial turning points as they happened.

Indeed, an important temporal theme came from the participants' narratives about how they proactively engaged in long-term planning and budgeting of their finances as a means of survival. Different participants discussed their budgeting strategies: Kate and Priya dedicated budgets for activities such as food or social events, while Dani and Nadia actively saved significant sums of money to prepare for temporally challenging periods. For example, in her first interview in December 2020, Nadia shared how she was already preparing for the next summer holiday over six months away:

> *"I always do feel anxious about when summer comes like I'm not gonna have any money [...] I am like trying to save up little bits through each term so that way when it actually comes to paying rent over the summer I don't have to do the same thing I did last year [working full-time] [...] I know how bad it was, so this time I'm preparing myself"* (Nadia, int 1)

Nadia shared with me how her challenging experiences of managing finances during the summer in past years had shaped her practices in the present and towards the future. Hence, rather than being situated entirely with her present 'struggle' or stability, Nadia and other estranged students are fluidly engaging with their past student timeline and anticipating challenging periods in the future calendar (Adam,

1990). This financial looking ahead can span even further, as Kate wrote about her financial concerns over a year ahead:

> *"I am expecting less student finance and less financial support as I go into my final year. I fear that I won't be able to keep up payments on my rent, or live over the summer if I am not supported with this"* (Kate, Mar21 diary)

This concern for future survival faced by estranged students is not solely a material concern that involves passively accumulating enough economic capital before it happens, but one that carries a strong emotive 'anxiety' and 'fear' of insecurity in the present, that may impact their ability to engage with student life. While there is some similarity here with findings around how mature students orientate themselves as striving for a better future through education (see Stevenson & Clegg, 2013), a major difference here is that estranged students' orientation towards the future is less aligned with social mobility, but with a necessity to survive.

Although the participants were able to predict that the holidays would be a temporally challenging time, many of them also shared moments in their student journey where unpredictable costs came up that created economic difficulties. These 'hidden costs' could arise across all domains of their student life: Finn shared how they found it *"hard to finance all the materials"* (Finn, int 1) required for their course, and Priya reflected on how she needed to cover all of the costs to run a society in advance and wait weeks for reimbursement, saying *"it can be really hard because not everyone has that amount of money just being ready"* (Priya, int 2). These narratives demonstrate the ways that different pockets across the higher education sector lean into family ideology (Bernardes, 1997) and assume that students have access to spare economic capitals from their maintenance loan or their family, and identify some gaps in policy that could be improved to make the wider student experience more affordable and accessible for students estranged from their families. Unexpected costs were exacerbated further by the pandemic. In her final interview, Beth reflected on how her classes moving online added extra financial strain:

> *"before the pandemic I didn't have Wi-Fi at home I couldn't afford it [...] I did all my work at uni and then when I came home I would either put my hotspot on my phone or I'd just wait until the next day [...] obviously during the pandemic everything went online, and for the first two or three weeks I thought I'll just use my phone, but you know it became impossible"* (Beth, int 2)

As explored in Chapter 5, emerging findings from early in the pandemic found that many estranged and care experienced students encountered unexpected costs they needed to pay to continue their engagement with learning and student life from home (Become et al., 2020b, 2020a). Beth's story emphasises how students' access to the internet and technology from home is taken-for-granted in the sector, but for estranged students it may be a sacrifice they made in the past to manage their funds that can no longer be made. The increased unexpected costs from the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis risk not just 'digital poverty' (Mueller, 2020) and the inability to engage in academic life from an absence of internet access, but may have a knock-on effect on estranged students' longer-term financial planning and future security.

While estranged students can face disproportionate financial challenges due to the shortfalls in student funding, another theme that arose in their narratives was an active awareness of their disadvantaged financial positionality in higher education. For example, Finn reflected on how the unexpected costs of higher education and in their personal life created larger financial ripples for them compared to their peers who could draw upon their family: *"I so wish that I had that option as it would take the stress of studying off me completely"* (Finn, Feb21 diary). Similarly, Hollie shared a dissonance she felt with her peers from more privileged backgrounds:

> *"their parents pay for their rent and they're all like 'we've got no money' and I'm like 'you literally do'. Like I do, 'but you've got all this money' I was like 'yeah but this has got to be for the whole year [...] I've not got anyone to bail me out'"* (Hollie, int 1)

Their narratives highlight some of the ways that financial challenges are not merely practical but shape the ways that estranged students perceive their position as disadvantaged in higher education. These students desired a sense of stability and support that they saw from those around them who can draw upon their family's economic capitals and resources (Scheinfeld & Worley, 2018). Such a distinction from their peers in terms of financial stability could impact their sense of belonging and whether they 'fit in' to their university (Burnell, 2015) and with the students around them, who could be a primary source of emotional support during their studies.

Although the threat of financial destitution is a core theme in this study and previous research with estranged students, it is important to not assume financial 'struggle' is a universal experience. In this study, Rhys and Dani shared having large sums of economic capital that they drew upon during their studies. Rhys had run a successful business since sixth form and had enough money to cover his university costs, reflecting on how *"it's comforting to say the least when you see others maybe in their overdraft you think 'god I'm glad that's not me'"* (Rhys, int 1). For Dani, a compensation pay-out during the research project meant that she had enough money to last the entirety of her studies, and she described how *"that bit of extra cushion behind me [...] they're going to help me in the future as well as now"* (Dani, int 2). Their unique narratives of present financial stability and future security demonstrate the ways that economic capitals can relieve many of the pressures placed upon estranged students, enabling them to orientate themselves less around their 'struggle' and instead on their ability to survive and thrive, within and beyond their studies. This makes a compelling case to increase the financial support available to estranged students.

8.2.3 Acquiring economic resources for the future through work

In order to accumulate additional economic capitals in their preparation for the future, many of the participants took up paid work. Four students worked during term-time: Priya and Sophie took a variety of 'temp work', while Asha worked as a tutor and

Rhys ran his business. Working part-time during studies is increasingly common across the student population, as more than 50% of undergraduate students pick up work opportunities in term-time (Bhattacharya & Payne, 2024; NUS, 2022b). Practically, those who work alongside their studies commonly describe challenges with 'juggling' their academic and job commitments (e.g. Christiansen et al., 2019; Mills, 2020), which for estranged students may intensify the difficulties of balancing academic and personal time discussed earlier in this chapter. Moreover, Antonucci (2016) identified that part-time work during studies can lead students to struggle with their identity and need to negotiate their positionality between 'student' and 'worker'. As explored in Chapter 7, estranged students are also negotiating their personal identities beyond their biological family, so these aspects combined may exacerbate their positionality as different from peers and impact their feelings of belonging within their university (Thomas, 2012).

Furthermore, four of the participants also took up full-time work in the holidays. During their summers, Sophie and Asha picked up lots of 'temp work', while Kate and Nadia had full-time roles in nannying and customer service respectively. While this work brought in financial capital that relieved the pressure on survival, they shared how these additional responsibilities impacted their ability to 'enjoy' their summer as other students can. Kate reflected on how her intense work schedule meant *"I won't get any of that precious time to myself to sit and chill and not do a lot!"* (Kate, Aug21 diary). The holidays are framed as an opportunity for studenthood to pause, to recuperate from the stresses of the academic calendar before the next term begins (Lisa & Unite Foundation, 2022); however, Kate's narrative highlights the ways that estranged students do not get this luxury of a break from independence, as they need to continue supporting themselves through the summer and use it as an opportunity to economically prepare for the future. This can have more negative impacts on estranged students: as Nadia reflected in her first interview on how her need to work full-time in the 2020 summer negatively impacted her mental health, *"it felt really bad cuz I had a tiny little desk crammed up in the corner of my bedroom"* (Nadia, int 1). Thus, the pressures to prepare for the future, and challenging circumstances within which they work in the present during university

holidays, highlights another core difference between estranged students and their peers in how they engage with student life.

Even with the looming necessity of picking up work to supplement their gaps in income over the holidays, estranged students with certain intersectional characteristics faced greater barriers in acquiring stable work. While their narratives contained a strong theme of financial 'struggle', Finn and Beth described how they were unable to find suitable work due to their disabilities and caring responsibilities, heightening the importance of 'stretching' their resources even further. Such intersectional experiences are little considered in the financial support provided by the state (students are unable to apply for state benefits), showing an example of how estranged students who are do not fit the 'ordinary discourse' of family support and studenthood are economically marginalised in the UK (Bernardes, 1997; Bourdieu, 2001).

8.3   Navigating housing

Another core experiential theme tied strongly to financial experiences within estranged students' narratives came from their housing. The social and cultural 'rite of passage' with accommodation for the general undergraduate student population in the UK, especially young students, is to move out of the family home and live on or close to campus (Hubble & Bolton, 2020; Hughes-Slattery, 2023), often moving between different accommodation each academic year (Bland, 2018). Literature on estranged students has explored how their living situations may deviate from this norm, identifying that many estranged students live further away and commute into campus (Bhattacharya & Payne, 2024) and are more likely to live alone or with non-students (Bland, 2015). For the estranged students in this research, there was vast diversity in where they lived, who they lived with, and the stability of their accommodations. Figure 8.1 on the next page demonstrates the complex and diverse housing histories across core temporal moments for the estranged students.
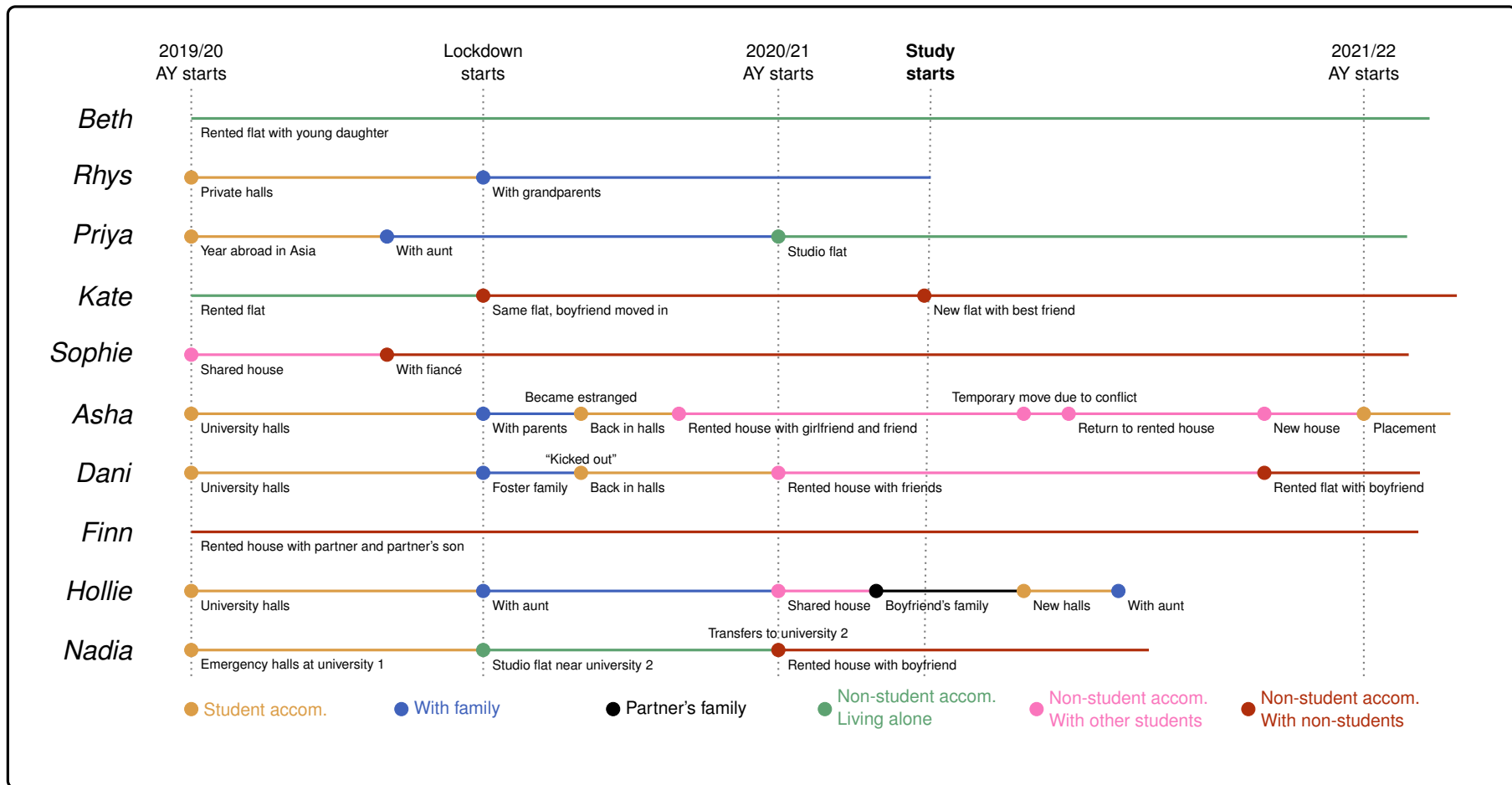
Figure 8.1: Timeline of housing circumstances for each participant during their studies, colour-coded based on housing category with notes of where and who they lived with. Priya was the only participant studying in the 2018/19 academic year, which is omitted from the diagram: she stayed in university halls.

This visualisation aids in identifying the different transitions in housing for estranged students. For example, the start of lockdown in March 2020 was a significant unexpected turning point that displaced those living in student accommodation, necessitating the common pattern for students to temporarily move 'back home' with family (Bolton & Hubble, 2021). However, for some of the estranged students in this study, lockdown was an incredibly challenging period that resulted in conflicts, as seen in Asha and Dani's timelines. Other housing transitions occurred throughout the calendar year, with frequent transitions between accommodations for Hollie and Asha in particular. In contrast, some students had relatively stable home environments, with Sophie and Kate only moving once, while Beth and Finn stayed in the same accommodation for multiple years, more reminiscent of the housing experiences of mature students (Hayman et al., 2024). These findings illustrate how estranged students' housing can differ significantly from the expected student housing transitions at set periods each academic year, even when living in otherwise 'traditional' student accommodation.

The following sections will explore some of the core themes in the ways the estranged student participants navigated accommodation during their studies: barriers to access housing, living in low-quality housing, and the challenges of managing their belongings. Before exploring these aspects, it is important to note that these experiences were primarily mentioned by the participants moved between different accommodations, rather than those who had one consistent house. Existing research with estranged students has prioritised discussion of these variable housing transitions (e.g. Minty et al., 2022; Y. Taylor & Costa, 2019), likely due to the framing of estranged students as a young and otherwise 'traditional' student population, but without family support. The findings of this study will build upon this with important temporal insights into how estranged students may navigate their housing in unique ways over time.

8.3.1   Barriers to access housing

For the students who moved between different accommodations, a common theme in their narratives was a consistent difficulty in finding a guarantor or sourcing major

financial deposits to secure their desired housing. For example, Priya shared how *"because I don't have a contact with my family [to be a guarantor] [...] I had to pay the full amount [of rent] as soon as I started my contract, had to pay it out right"* (Priya, int 1) for her accommodation in her second and third years of study; and she also anticipated the same issue going into her final year. Similarly, Nadia described how her need to provide a guarantor was *"one issue I've always found literally through the whole time I've moved out"* (Nadia, int 1). The reoccurring experiences of needing to find a guarantor echo previous findings with estranged students, where issues of large deposits and losing housing have been a major theme for their participants (e.g. Bland, 2018; Minty et al., 2022; Unite Foundation & Stand Alone, 2015). As explored in the previous section, estranged students are often already navigating a need to significantly *"stretch"* (Finn, Jan21 diary) their economic capitals more than most students, for whom most would find providing a full year of rent in advance a major challenge. Thus, the continued financial pressures that housing policies caused for estranged students enhance economic inequalities for this population, as well as increasing housing instability and the risk of homelessness during their studies. Upcoming changes to student rights with their accommodation that ban upfront rent deposits of more than one month (see Dickinson, 2025a) may ease these financial burdens, but the continued need for students to mobilise their social capital and provide a guarantor will disproportionately affect estranged students.

While these challenges in accessing housing may only occur a handful of times during their studies, there may be longitudinal impacts of these moments on how far estranged students feel that they 'belong' at their university overall. Nadia shared her account of missing out on her desired accommodation of sharing a house with other students at the very start of her studies, due to her guarantor service co-signer (a friend's mum) dropping out on the night before she was due to move in. Reflecting back on this moment in her first interview, Nadia pondered how *"if I'd just moved into that house maybe I would have been a lot better off at [old university], maybe I would have been able to make friends"* (Nadia, int 1). An important temporal consideration is raised here. Most student accommodation providers offer short-term contracts for within the academic or calendar year, and the timings of when these contracts

need to be signed can be volatile in a student housing crisis where students are competing for accommodation earlier and have lower quality options to choose from (see NUS, 2024). Moreover, Dickinson (2025b) raised concerns that an amendment in the upcoming Renters Rights Bill may result in landlords only offering 6-month rental contracts causing a 'housing scramble' at the start of March. As such, these student housing patterns run the risk of fully excluding those estranged students who want to have a 'traditional' student housing experience from doing so, which can then have implications on how far they feel as though they 'fit in' at university (Burnell, 2015; Thomas, 2012), as it did for Nadia at her first university.

8.3.2   Living in low-quality housing

Even when estranged students can access accommodation, being restricted to low-quality housing options was a prominent theme in their narratives. Half of the participants, including those who lived in non-student accommodation, described shortfalls in the quality of their housing. On the extreme end, examples included Nadia's experience of a *"woodlouse infestation"* (Nadia, int 1) in her studio flat, while Priya had *"numerous faults happening my fuse box is messed up, my hobs keep tripping the fuse box and have been replaced 3 times, the shower was blocked, tv doesn't work etc."* (Priya, Jan21 diary). These signify challenging temporal moments that are faced by many students navigating the housing market, as a survey of 801 privately renting students in the UK found that 54% had experienced issues with damp or mould (Students Organising for Sustainability UK, 2023). Alongside these major faults, many of the estranged students also reflected on the ways that their housing failed to cultivate a comfortable space for them to live in their narratives. For example, Sophie described the small flat she shared with her fiancé as *"intense"* (Sophie, Jul21 diary), Priya likened her studio flat to a *"prison"* (Priya, int 1), and Hollie described her assigned first-year accommodation as *"like a mental asylum [...] my room was like a box, I had barely any storage space it was so cluttered up"* (Hollie, int 1). These narratives highlight the ways that lower levels of economic capital to afford better housing or social capital and the inability to have a family

guarantor or seek housing advice (Costa et al., 2020a) may compromise estranged students' ability to cultivate a safe living environment.

Moreover, some housing environments may be uniquely perceived as low-quality by estranged students who do not have access to a family 'home'. For example, in her first interview Nadia reflected on why it was important to have her own bathroom when she moved out of her abusive grandmother's home to begin university: *"the other people, they have their own space when they go home, but this is going to be my space all the time so I wanted it to feel, I didn't want to feel like I have to share like my bathroom"* (Nadia, int 1). In their housing transitions, estranged students still need to consider factors that all students use to find accommodation, such as cost or convenience to campus, alongside these pastoral needs like having a personal space. These needs may be difficult to achieve within the traditional student accommodation structures that are designed to allocate a 'roof' to students who do not typically have specific needs or traumatic backgrounds (Aaslund, 2021; Marvell & Child, 2023), and may explain why many estranged students choose to live elsewhere. However, the choice to live off-campus may mean that estranged students add intersectional disadvantages as a result of their housing, for example how many 'commuter' students face challenges with engaging with wider student life as a result of their geographical distance from campus (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Maslin, 2025). Chapter 10 will explore the notion of 'home' further, exploring how the estranged students in this study drew upon support from people around them to assist their creation of a safe and comfortable 'home' during their studies.

8.3.3   Managing personal belongings

An important and novel theme around housing that came through in the participants' narratives were the challenges of managing their personal belongings during housing transitions. In her diaries as the summer holiday approached, Dani wrote about her concerns with managing the move in with her boyfriend alongside her exams:

> *"I have to start packing and cleaning whilst making the start on exam preparations. There is so much to do and so little time. I am constantly tired. I have no family I can call to help with it all. I have no one I can call to help me move my stuff. So I am having to get 2 uber xl to fit all of my stuff in. Hopefully that will be enough."* (Dani, Jun21 diary)

For most students moving between student accommodation, there is an assumption that they leave most of their belongings 'at home' and only bring their essentials to university (Bland, 2018; Marvell & Child, 2023). Here, Dani identifies a difference from her non-estranged peers in her inability to draw on taken-for-granted family resources to help her with the transition into new housing (Scharp & McLaren, 2017), increasing the pressure on her self-maintained economic capitals. When housing transitions coincide with core moments in the academic calendar, this can also exacerbate the challenges with balancing academic and personal time, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

However, even once the temporal moment of 'moving' into a new accommodation has ended, estranged students continue to experience a transition and pressure when it comes to settling into that new space. Dani shared in her second interview, two months after she moved in, how *"I'm still living out of boxes [...] we've literally not had much time to properly unpack"* (Dani, int 2). This slow transition into a new housing environment was also shared by Asha in her second interview, whose recent move into her third-year house had stagnated:

> *"I was living in someone else's room [when she first moved into the house] and so I didn't really bother unpacking, and I also knew I was moving to [placement city] so I didn't really fully unpack until this weekend [...] everything was in bags for weeks, months really"* (Asha, int 2)

Rather than experiencing a seamless transition from one house to another, these narratives show how estranged students living in traditional student accommodation need to frequently pack, unpack, and repack their belongings, which can lead to feelings of displacement for significant periods of time. These

experiences of *"living out of boxes"* for months at a time can leave estranged students without a secure place during their studies. While these experiences are not as directly threatening as homelessness, an experience that is a very real threat to many estranged students (Bland, 2015; Spacey, 2020), stressful transitions and instability between houses may leave estranged students feeling an 'emotional homelessness' (Waterman, 2019), or 'homelessness at home' (Mallett, 2004). Such feelings may be exacerbated even further for students who were frequently transitioning between multiple accommodations each year, such as Asha and Hollie (see Figure 8.1 on page 192). These barriers to secure and stable accommodation during their studies can cause personal disruption which risk having detrimental impacts on their capacity to engage with, and feel belonging in, the institutional 'field' (Bourdieu, 1982/2019).

8.4   Navigating the holidays

The final experiential domain that this chapter will discuss is the temporal experiences of estranged students during the holidays. Existing qualitative research with estranged students has identified how this population may face exacerbated challenges with their finances, accommodation, and mental health outside of term time (Bland, 2015, 2018). These are especially prominent in the summer, as they are unable to follow the normative student patterns of 'going home' and must stretch their limited resources further, placing estranged students at risk of destitution during these transition periods between academic terms (Marvell & Child, 2023; Minty et al., 2022). However, these studies have all relied on long-term retrospective accounts of the holiday periods, meaning that many extreme experiences are reported on and the potential diversity in estranged students' experiences during the holidays is unclear. To fill these gaps in the literature around estranged students' experiences outside of term-time, this research project used a longitudinal design where nine estranged students wrote in-depth diary entries about their day-to-day lives throughout the academic year and its holidays, as they happened. The temporal frame of this study (see Figure

6.1 on page 117) enabled in-depth insights into how the participants navigated the three major academic holidays in the 2020/21 academic year: winter (aligning with Christmas), spring (aligning with Easter), and summer. Drawing on the temporal aspects discussed so far and other insights from the participants, the holidays will be discussed chronologically to explore how these periods are experienced in diverse and fluid ways by estranged students.

8.4.1 Navigating Christmas

Data collection for this study began in December 2020 meaning that the first interview and diary entries coincided with the Christmas holiday. In the UK, Christmas is a significant temporal moment within family ideology, as the normative experience is to spend it with family and actively 'display' their strong bonds to others through gift giving and sharing photographs on social media (Boddy, 2019; Finch, 2007). For those estranged from family, the Christmas period is often considered a 'trigger date' (L. Blake, 2017), a turning point where practical and emotional challenges can arise. The existing literature with estranged students has focused on those who spend the Christmas holiday alone and the challenges with managing isolation when encountering strong family 'display' from their non-estranged peers (e.g. Anonymous Oxford student, 2018; Lisa & Unite Foundation, 2022). In contrast, none of the estranged students in this study spent the holiday alone, instead spending the winter break with their romantic partners and extended family.

Despite not spending their Christmas physically alone, many of the participants shared a heightened sense of feeling isolated as their supportive peers were more distant. For example, Finn shared how:

> *"I struggle around Christmas because everyone's going off to their families, I won't see my friends for a few more weeks [...] communication kind of gets to a lower level because they're too busy doing other things so it's always quite almost lonely in a way around this time"* (Finn, int 1)

The lapse in communication with friends over the Christmas period may exacerbate feelings of isolation for estranged students whose friends take the position of 'family' (as discussed in Chapter 7), when their ability to 'practise' family through communication is lost (D. H. J. Morgan, 1996; Vangelisti, 2022, see Chapter 3). Although Nadia had the opportunity to spend the Christmas holidays with her boyfriend and his family, she felt it was not an adequate replacement to spending it with her biological family, sharing how *"I always think you know I'd much rather be with my own mum and sister"* (Nadia, int 1). These narratives demonstrate the ways that family ideology can shape estranged students' perceptions of their familial experiences as 'abnormal' (Skolnick & Skolnick, 2014) during the Christmas period, and the loss of peer support at these temporal moments may enhance feelings of isolation.

Moreover, this loneliness was likely compounded by lockdown restrictions. In December 2020, travel bans were imposed across the UK which prohibited gatherings and disrupted Christmas traditions for much of the general population (see Armstrong, 2020), including many non-estranged students who could not 'travel home' as they usually would (Fazackerley, 2020). As a result, three students adjusted their existing plans of spending the holidays with friends and family. Sophie described how it was likely going to be *"a more subdued version of normal"* (Sophie, int 1), but Priya and Finn described a strong emotional impact from the changes in their diaries:

> *"i was able to see my gran one time before the new rules were put into motion however i still feel upset that i wont be able to see her [in the holidays]"* (Priya, Dec20 diary)

> *"we've cancelled literally everything to do with family or friends, so I'm feeling super down about it"* (Finn, Dec20 diary)

Christmas 2020 was historically unique in how many people in Britain, and across much of the world, shared a collective sense of disconnection from family and

experienced the 'isolation' that estranged people have described commonly facing during the Christmas period. However, this did not necessarily level the playing field for estranged students with their peers during this time, as the dual sense of loss around not being able to spend the holidays with their family or engage in their alternative support plans maintained the distance from societal 'normality' that estranged young people hold in family ideology (Bernardes, 1997; Hugman, 2022).

A significant theme within estranged students' narratives of being able to spend Christmas period with people they cared about was a sentiment of *luck*. When reflecting on the holiday, three participants talked about they felt *lucky* about not spending the Christmas break alone (my emphasis):

> *"i haven't been alone over the holiday period which I feel incredibly **lucky** about"* (Asha, Jan21 diary)

> *"I'm really **lucky** in the fact that I have my partner and his family [...] when it comes to Christmas"* (Nadia, int 1)

> *"I'm staying with my boyfriend and his mum for Christmas, usually I'd be at my aunt's but yeah with Covid I kind of **lucked out** with not having to deal with her on Christmas"* (Hollie, int 1)

These narratives highlight the strength of family ideology and the deficit stigmatisation models applied to family estrangement, which assign an isolated and challenging Christmas as the only alternative to spending it with family (K. R. Allen & Henderson, 2016; L. Blake, 2017). There is a sense here that estranged students have internalised their social position of 'deviance' within the higher education and wider family field (Atkinson, 2014; Boddy, 2019), leading them to believe that their positive experiences are due to 'luck', rather than something they can take for granted as their student peers can.

However, the Christmas holiday is not homogenously experienced as an inevitably isolating and 'triggering' time for estranged students. As discussed in Chapter 7,

family estrangement brings many young people who had a negative experience in their families a sense of liberation and freedom, and for Kate this extended into the Christmas period. In her interview, she shared how *"I prefer my Christmases now because there's not as much stress with it [...] I get opportunities that I wouldn't have got to otherwise"* (Kate, int 1), such as spending Christmas 2019 abroad with her boyfriend. She unpacked this positive shift in mentality at the time in a diary entry:

> *"I used to find the holidays pretty tough going, as I felt constantly reminded on my family and the estrangement. However I no longer feel this way as I have found my own 'chosen family' through my friends, boyfriend, his family and the people I work with"* (Kate, Dec20 diary)

Kate's account of how she had reclaimed her Christmas demonstrates a unique way that estranged students are orientated towards their future, rather than being trapped in deficit models around family estrangement or traumas from their past. Her agentic redefining of 'family' shows how estranged young people can resist the 'deviant' label imposed by family ideology and instead rebuild healthy and positive relationships with the holiday period (Heaphy, 2016; Mizielińska, 2022). Questions arise here around how far universities could provide support or opportunities for estranged students to celebrate the holidays and help to break down the ideological dominance of students who 'return home' and spend Christmas with their families, which will be explored further in Chapter 9.

8.4.2   Navigating Easter

Following Christmas, the next break in the academic calendar aligns with the Easter holiday in the spring. The Easter holiday is one which carries fewer sentimental connotations in family ideology than the Christmas period, but it is still characterised by isolation, as many students 'return home' and campuses become quiet (Bland, 2015; Spacey, 2020). Indeed, Finn reflected on how they were *"Feeling a little low due to everyone having plans with their families and looking forward to going back to see them [...] i think I'm just jealous of them all. I miss my family"* (Finn, Mar21 diary).

This echoes their narrative from Christmas and highlights how the Easter holiday may also be a 'trigger' (L. Blake, 2017) temporal moment that acts as a reminder of their difference to peers with positive family relationships. Yet these feelings of isolation may be further compounded by the pressures of the upcoming examination period on most academic calendars. As such, the Easter holiday should be viewed as another turning point where estranged students may be at risk of experiencing intensified 'struggles' with their academic work, mental health, or disadvantaged positionality within higher education.

While the Easter holiday may elicit feelings of isolation, Spacey's (2020) photo-elicitation study with eight estranged students at a university in England found that many of the participants had 'coping strategies to get through' (p. 5) this challenging period, particularly social activities and visiting other places. Similar experiences were echoed by the students in this study: in their diary entries over the Easter holiday of their day-to-day lives, Beth, Sophie, and Asha described positive experiences where they did hobbies, travelled, or spent time with friends. However, rather than being framed as a coping mechanism from what would be a challenging temporal period, Easter was conceptualised as a positive break from the pressures of term-time that provided time and space for them *"to have fun"* (Asha, Apr21 diary). As such, the longitudinal design of this study enabled unique insights into how estranged students can view the holidays in an excited and empowered way, rather than assuming a deficit approach to estranged students' experiences of higher education.

In contrast, a core finding from this research over the Easter holiday was how this holiday may not constitute a 'break' for some estranged students, especially for those who do not live on campus and are not integrated into the academic timeline. In her diary, Nadia reflected on her experience of the Easter 'break':

> *"I didn't even realise that we were on Easter break when it came. I was working on assignments when it started and told myself that it's fine if I skip a couple lectures to work on them [...] I spoke to a friend, told her that i'm skipping everything and it's stressing my out and she asked why I wasn't on easter break. I checked my timetable and I WAS on easter break. i WASTED my entire easter break doing assignments [...] and didn't set aside any time for myself"* (Nadia, Apr21 diary)

Nadia's narrative highlights the ways in which students who live at a physical distance from the university 'field' (Bourdieu, 1982/2019), or those whose estrangement from family means they do not look ahead and prepare for the opportunity to return 'home', may be disconnected from the academic calendar that they are expected to be fully situated within. This highlights a mismatch between the fluid personal timelines that students off campus may use to navigate their work and the fixed nature of academic calendars and the holidays that students may *"waste"* by being off rhythm with the flow of academic time (Adam, 1990). As a result, the holidays that are given to students may not necessarily be experienced in the intended way, particularly during the Easter holiday that does not have as significant a familial discourse as Christmas, or as large a cut off from the academic year as the summer.

8.4.3   Navigating summer

The final holiday period that estranged students navigate during their studies is summer. Summer represents a liminal transition in time between one academic year and the next, meaning that many universities 'close' for students during this period (Bland, 2015). Existing research has identified significant ways that the summer holiday can exacerbate the material disadvantages that estranged students face, including increased risks of homelessness or financial destitution when their Student Finance payments end, and the heightened sense of isolation when their peers 'go home' (e.g. Become et al., 2020a; Marvell & Child, 2023; Minty et al., 2022). Uniquely, this longitudinal study was able to draw novel insights into the diverse and

fluid ways that estranged students experience the summer holiday as it happened, as six participants wrote regular diary entries about their day-to-day lives.

For estranged students, the summer holiday can represent a period of concern rather than respite: *"I thought the relief after exams would be good but now I have summer to worry about [...] Its all a bit much"* (Beth, Jun21 diary). Several challenges can arise during the summer that make it a period of *"worry"* that were explored earlier in this chapter. Overall, the estranged students in this study identified how the end of Student Finance payments made summer an economically challenging period associated with a 'struggle' for survival, where they needed to orientate themselves towards the future and utilise opportunities such as paid work to source further economic capitals. Moreover, a unique challenge that this study identified was the tension in temporal framing by the university and estranged students, as universities 'pushed back' academic responsibilities into the summer and the narratives of estranged students who were unable to 'move forward' as a result. These challenges that arise for estranged students during the summer holiday can make it difficult for students to feel that they 'belong' in higher education (Burnell, 2015; Crozier et al., 2019), as their unique positionality and needs are marginalised and seen as 'deviant' (Hugman, 2022) in higher education.

Despite the prominence of this narrative of 'struggle' for estranged students over the summer in the existing research and from findings in this study, interestingly most of the participants who spoke or wrote about their summer experiences shared temporal moments of respite and enjoyment. Rhys, Asha, Sophie, Nadia and Dani either recalled positive experiences from their previous summers in the first interview, or shared good moments from the summer of 2021 in their diaries, such as going on holiday and spending quality time with loved ones. Similar to Easter, the longer summer holiday offered opportunities for some estranged students to disconnect from the pressures in term-time and experience a summer holiday that matches those expected for the wider student population. This is not to say that their temporal challenges were not significant, but these findings demonstrate diversity in estranged students' experiences, and help to break down

the homogenous deficit discourses often made that assume that the 'lack' of a family support system means that estranged students exclusively experience 'struggle' (Costa et al., 2020a).

8.5   Conclusion

This chapter has explored the diverse ways that estranged students navigated the day-to-day lives of their university studies.

The novel QL narrative design of this research enabled clearer understanding of estranged students' stories and experiences of higher education over time. This study found that the participants focused on their long-term survival, breaking stereotypes of students prioritising the short-term. They were acutely aware of their marginalised position without the 'safety net' of family, particularly when they were expected to cover additional costs, navigate emotionally difficult times, or move 'back home' through the holidays.

However, these participants were ultimately *students*, deeply situated in their academic lives and seeking a sense of belonging at their university but facing barriers to success as a result of family ideology. These findings counter the homogenisation of estranged students' experiences and the exclusive focus on 'struggle' that, while still very real, was not core to their identity. The following chapters will explore the formal and informal support that they drew upon to mitigate challenges.

CHAPTER 9

GAPS IN SUPPORT OFFERED

The last chapter discussed the diverse ways that estranged students experienced higher education. It considered how the participants faced unique challenges at university as a result of family ideology, and their need to continuously look ahead towards the future. To mitigate these challenges, they drew on formal and informal support.

This and the following chapter address the final research question: *What support do estranged students engage with during their studies?* This chapter will critically discuss the support that estranged students were offered by their university. This chapter begins by exploring the varied perspectives that estranged students had about support that was designed specifically for those studying without family support. Then, it will highlight the significant issues that they faced when navigating generalised student support offerings that were not designed with their unique experiences (as explored in Chapter 8) in mind.

9.1   Overview of support offered

As explored in Chapter 5, there is no statutory baseline of what higher education institutions must provide for estranged students in the UK, resulting in vast variations of what is offered to estranged students at different universities (Minty et al., 2022). Some institutions may offer a comprehensive support package with a dedicated estrangement team from their commitments to the Stand Alone Pledge (Spacey et al., 2023). Others may struggle to commit resources specifically to estranged students and thus present a more generic support offering (Bhattacharya & Payne,

2024). As there is no 'support for estranged students' league table, it is extremely difficult for prospective students to choose a university that will provide adequate support for their individual circumstances, resulting in a kind of 'lottery'.

Indeed, the amount of support offered to estranged students in this study differed vastly across institutions. This is evident in Table 9.1 on the following page which provides an overview of the support participants mentioned being offered by their university, and by external organisations who supported students with their intersectional characteristics of disability and care experience.

It is important to acknowledge that this is not a comprehensive list of formal support at each student's institution, as it only includes that which the participants spoke about. They may have forgotten that they were offered support, deliberately chosen not to mention some support, or support may have been offered 'on paper' but not in practice (Spacey et al., 2023). Moreover, the presence of support in this table did not always translate to the students accessing that support. Even if they did access support, it was not always adequate in addressing their needs.

Table 9.1: Types of support formally offered to estranged student participants by their university or other organisations

	Support	Beth	Rhys	Priya	Kate	Sophie	Asha	Dani	Finn	Hollie	Nadia
Staff	Dedicated estrangement team		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
	Dedicated contact (pastoral)			✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Financial	Estranged students' bursary		✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓
	General WP bursary			✓						✓	✓
	Hardship funds	✓		✓		✓			✓		
	Holiday bridging funds		✓	✓					✓		
	Pandemic bridging funds		✓	✓			✓		✓		
	Support with 'hidden costs' (e.g. graduation, job interviews)			✓	✓		✓		✓		
	SFE application help						✓				
Housing	365-day accommodation				✓		✓				
	Assistance finding housing				✓	✓			✓		
	Rent guarantor service						✓				

Continued on next page

Table 9.1: Types of support formally offered to estranged student participants by their university or other organisations (cont.)

	Support	Beth	Rhys	Priya	Kate	Sophie	Asha	Dani	Finn	Hollie	Nadia
Wellbeing	Estranged student meetups		✓	✓	✓			✓		✓		✓
	Care packages						✓				
	Counselling	✓				✓		✓		✓	
	Newsletters and events		✓	✓					✓	✓	
Academic	Extensions to assignments	✓						✓			
	Reasonable adjustments	✓		✓	✓			✓			
	Deferring exams or coursework until summer	✓		✓				✓			
	Careers service			✓						✓	
	Opportunities newsletters			✓					✓		
External	Student Finance [a]	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Disabled Students' Allowance	✓				✓				✓	
	Care Leavers support				✓			✓			

[a] All participants were granted estranged student status by SFE.

9.2   Dedicated estrangement support

Seven of the ten participants knew that their university had a dedicated estrangement team, a centralised hub that provided tailored support for estranged students during their studies. The following sections will discuss the three core forms of support that they were offered by these teams: financial, social, and pastoral support.

9.2.1   Financial support

The most common form of support offered to the participants by their university's dedicated estrangement team was financial support. There were variations in the financial provision offered, but all seven students received a bursary in the range of £1000–£3000 per academic year that were seen as *"a huge help"* (Finn, int 1) to bridge the gaps between SFE payments. Alongside these funds paid in instalments throughout the year, four of the students (Rhys, Priya, Finn and Asha) received bridging funds at temporally challenging periods, such as in the summer and during lockdown. These additional funds demonstrate an awareness by their universities that estranged students' experience recurring turning points of financial insecurity and changing support needs, as explored in Chapter 8. Some institutions went even further in their financial offerings, with Asha and Kate describing how they were offered money to help cover gym memberships, job interviews, and graduation costs. The response to this was generally positive, providing *"an extra little bit of help [...] with things again that your parents probably help with otherwise"* (Kate, int 2). These positive narratives around support highlight the ways that tangible economic capital provided by universities can help to bridge the gap of disadvantage as a result of their family estrangement, and can provide a financial 'safety net' and buffer in a crisis not too dissimilar from those expected by families (Costa et al., 2020a; Swartz et al., 2011).

However, while received positively overall, there were some shortfalls with the tailored financial support offered to the students. For example, as Asha's medicine

course was longer than the majority of degrees at her university, she was *"not sure if it goes for my whole course"* (Asha, int 1), enhancing her concerns for the future around her financial security. Similarly, Priya received additional funds in the summer of 2021 with the intention of covering the lost income from the reduced job opportunities in the pandemic, but *"the support doesn't really substitute the usual amount of pay I would get during the summer and so it leaves me anxious for what to do in the next academic year"* (Priya, Jul21 diary). These narratives identify an issue with how universities position financial support for estranged students: institutions are incentivised to keep them afloat to survive in the present to prevent imminent withdrawal (Bland, 2015; Tinto, 1993), without considering the unique ways that estranged students are temporally orientated towards their long-term survival into the future.

9.2.2   Social support

Another programme that the participants commonly identified as being offered to them was the opportunity to connect with other students without family support at their institution. The purpose of these social events is to help combat the isolation that many estranged students feel when studying as a student without family support and enable them to build an empathetic support system with others from similar backgrounds (Spacey et al., 2023). Six of the students mentioned that their university offered social events for estranged students multiple times a year, including events during the holidays and online activities during lockdown. Narratives about this support were largely positive: Finn described how the events bring estranged students at their university *"into one little bubble and we feel a lot better about our situation"* (Finn, int 1), while Kate reflected on how she appreciated the opportunity to find others who *"all understand what I am going through"* (Kate, Mar21 diary). Opportunities to connect with others during 'trigger dates' (L. Blake, 2017) was particularly appreciated by Nadia, who was grateful that *"I wouldn't have to spend Christmas all by myself"* (Nadia, int 1). These students' narratives echo those in the literature around higher education student support about the benefits of connecting with 'sympathetic others' (Jacklin & Le Riche,

2009, p. 743) who may have similar non-traditional habituses within higher education and able to create a mutual support system to guide one another through it. For estranged students whose personal circumstances are stigmatised and 'othered' in higher education (Agllias, 2017a; Wilson et al., 2022), it is beneficial for universities to use their symbolic capital to facilitate these spaces to reduce barriers to finding others, and work towards normalising and reducing the prominence of family ideology in the university field.

Despite the strong potential that these community-focused events have in supporting estranged students' wellbeing and helping them feel they 'fit' in higher education (Burnell, 2015), the longitudinal narrative design of this study enabled exploration of how these events became less accessible during certain periods of their studies. Two of the six students who were offered this support described facing barriers to participation during periods when they were not fitting the anticipated 'norm' of studenthood, namely being fully integrated to campus life. For example, Priya described how the events her university ran for estranged students over the pandemic became inaccessible as she needed to sign up in a group: *"as i do not have any friends i cant join these events which is a bit counter intuitive since these are supposed to be events to help you connect with people"* (Priya, Feb21 diary). Moreover, when she was on placements and living off-campus, Asha described how *"I can't really go to any of them [...] it doesn't feel like we've got much involvement with the university"* (Asha, int 2). These narratives highlight the ways that universities risk viewing the estranged student population in a homogenised way and overlook the diverse and changing circumstances of estranged students. This risks excluding them from events which can help them to feel more integrated and like they 'belong' at their institution (Crozier et al., 2019). In particular, the exclusion of those who live further away from campus can impact much of the estranged student population whose housing experiences commonly align with mature or commuter students (Bhattacharya & Payne, 2024; Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Hayman et al., 2024), providing a key example of how estranged students' intersectional experiences are rarely acknowledged in institutional support provision.

9.2.3 Pastoral support

The final form of support that the estranged students commonly mentioned in their narratives was pastoral support from a dedicated contact. Institutional estrangement teams are often made up of at least one dedicated contact who may signpost estranged students to institutional support or offer pastoral support in themselves. As explored in Chapter 4, estranged students are framed as being in a unique disadvantaged position in higher education for their 'lack' of family capital (Costa et al., 2020a), especially as emotional support from family is increasingly cited as significant by students in research about student support (e.g. Azaola, 2020; Raaper et al., 2022). Thus, the rationale for this personal support provided by universities is to act as a substitute for the continuous social and emotional resources that most students draw upon from their family (Bland & Stevenson, 2018; Scheinfeld & Worley, 2018).

For the estranged students in this study, dedicated contacts were primarily described in positive ways: Hollie shared how *"she's quite nice"* (Hollie, int 1); for Kate, *"the girls who work there are so so good"* (Kate, int 1); and Priya described how *"there's always one guy who I always see, so when I think of the [estrangement team] I think of him"* (Priya, int 1). These contacts were seen as a consistent and friendly face in an otherwise faceless organisation who were uniquely placed to become familiar with each students' unique needs and be able to offer catered support across their student experience, including the 'small things' that family are assumed to assist with in contemporary British society (Valentine, 2006). For example, in her first interview Nadia reflected on how she had asked her university's dedicated contact many questions during her transfer: *"he didn't make it feel trivial, he was really understanding [...] it made me feel a lot more at ease"* (Nadia, int 1), and she described how she felt able to ask him for similar advice as her studies progressed. As such, an institutional dedicated contact who can reliably dedicate time and compassion to individual students may become a 'safety net' of social capitals for estranged students during their studies (Bland & Stevenson, 2018; Finch & Mason, 1993). There is a risk, however, that the institutional desire

for estranged students to primarily draw upon their dedicated contacts may result in reliance on specific staff members, meaning that factors like staff turnover, reduction in funding, or students ending their studies through graduation or withdrawal could result in many experiencing a 'cliff-edge' (Baker, 2024b) and sudden loss of support.

9.2.4   Misrecognition of estrangement: barriers to support

So far, this chapter has explored the tailored support mechanisms that the estranged students were offered during their studies, highlighting the benefits and shortfalls of institutional support that attempts to acknowledge the unique circumstances and needs of estranged students. However, some of the students' narratives revealed a novel perspective on this support, that students felt their unique needs were 'misrecognised' by their university. The term 'misrecognition' has been used by Fraser (2007, 2008) to describe a form of social injustice whereby state institutions can deny an individual the cultural status they are entitled to, deeming them unworthy of respect or support within society. Such misrecognition of individuals acts as a form of passive, 'symbolic violence' and power from the state that perpetuates social inequalities (Bourdieu, 1984; James, 2015). This sense of misrecognition between estranged students' personal circumstances and student status assigned by their university arose in two of the participants' narratives.

The first example comes from Beth. As explored in Chapter 4, a major issue with the commonly used formal definition of estrangement is that it excludes students who have intersecting characteristics with other recognised widening participation categories in higher education. While Beth was recognised by SFE as an estranged student for being under 25 and her estrangement fitting the 'irreconcilable' definition, she explained how her university used her age (21) and living status to categorise her as a mature student:

> *"they assume 'cuz you live at home then you must be a mature student without realising that you live at home because you're not actually with your parents [...] they just chuck you into a category that you're not actually a part of"* (Beth, int 1)

Although the barriers to participating in higher education that Beth faced primarily stemmed from the challenges of being a student and a single parent without family support, her age was prioritised by the institution meaning she was automatically excluded from any support her university made available for estranged students. This form of status misrecognition placed Beth in a position of disadvantage within her institution when trying to access support, as staff implied she (as a mature student) should be more self-reliant: *"if you can't do it, don't be here"* (Beth, int 2). Such symbolic violence (James, 2015) of discursively enforcing that she did not 'belong' at her university stemmed from the assumptions in widening participation policy and practice that students fit neatly within one category of 'disadvantage', rather than acknowledging the intersecting characteristics that estranged students can have. Indeed, research with estranged students has identified a common co-occurrence of estranged and mature student status (e.g. Bhattacharya & Payne, 2024; Unite Foundation & Stand Alone, 2015), but Beth's narrative highlights how this diversity of personal circumstances may not be acknowledged when it comes to institutional support practices.

Another example of misrecognition faced by estranged students seeking dedicated support at their university was identified in Kate's narrative. Even though she fit into the formal definition of estrangement due to her 'legal estrangement' from her parents, Kate spoke with me in her second interview about how her recently granted status of being a 'care leaver' was taken more seriously by her university:

> *"when you're estranged and you tell people that you don't talk to your family [...] they have a preconception almost of like 'that was your fault and you don't really deserve any help' [...] whereas being able to tell people 'actually I'm a care leaver', I dunno it's just, it's just a change in perception, people treat you differently [...] when I go to the uni now because I've got my care leavers status they're more inclined to help me if I need it, which is stupid because I'm still the same person that I was two years ago when I didn't have that status"* (Kate, int 2)

Although Kate's estrangement status *was* acknowledged and she was entitled to university support in a way that Beth was not, her narrative highlights how estrangement as a student status is not given equal levels of recognition compared to similar categories that are more established in widening participation policy and practice (Marshall, 2016). Moreover, this distinction between care leavers and estranged students may stem from differences in social discourse around these experiences in the UK: care leavers are often perceived as 'vulnerable' and victimised (see S. Taylor, 2021, p. 4), whereas people estranged from their families are more often seen as at 'fault' for their experiences (J. Allen & Moore, 2017; L. Blake et al., 2015). For Kate, the consensus approaches to family discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 that problematise estrangement as 'abnormal' and perpetuate stigma around family estrangement permeate into the university field (Agllias, 2017a; Atkinson, 2020). The strength of family ideology in society may mean that even those who are positioned as empathetic and dedicated support contacts still impose reductionist perspectives about estrangement onto their students, which can impact the extent to which estranged students feel they 'fit in' to their institution, and society more broadly.

9.3   Generalised student support offerings

The focus of this chapter so far has been on the support mechanisms universities offer that are designed specifically for estranged students. Alongside this, most universities offer a broad range of support available to the general student population that estranged students are also eligible to receive. All participants in

this study shared examples of support offered to them by their institutions, including financial support teams, student housing teams, counselling services, and academic departments. The following sections will explore four core ways that this generic and reactionary approach to support used by universities raised barriers to accessing support for the estranged students whose student experiences differed from the assumed norm in higher education, within the domains of finance, wellbeing, academic, and housing support.

9.3.1   Issues with centralised hardship funds

Four of the participants mentioned that their university offered institutional hardship funds that they could apply for when they were in a period of financial hardship. In theory, this support has positive potential to support estranged students who need to 'stretch' limited funds throughout the calendar year (Bland, 2018) and for whom unexpected costs may threaten financial destitution, as discussed in Chapter 8. However, three of the four participants who tried to mobilise on this support faced bureaucratic barriers that prevented them from accessing the funds. For example, Sophie shared that she tried applying for the hardship fund in her first year, but *"their application process is very complicated [...] the amount of money they would provide, it wasn't necessarily worth eight hours of filling out paperwork"* (Sophie, int 1). Beth faced similar challenges with the application process, writing about how *"the process is so difficult to do that I gave up and asked a friend for help"* (Beth, Mar21 diary). The institution disadvantages estranged young people by expecting students to draw upon their family's economic capital to support through these challenges, or to mobilise their cultural capital when navigating the paperwork to receive funds (Andres, 2016; Waithaka, 2014).

Another oversight of the unique circumstances estranged students have in institutional financial support measures like hardship funds came from Priya's narrative, who wrote this in her diary:

> *"[the hardship fund application] requires us to provide a bank statement, however i often hold some of my family members finances in my account and i also have a large amount of cash in my account for my rent which i pay the full amount upfront before my tenancy starts this factors usually make it seem like i am more financially stable than i actually am"* (Priya, Jun21 diary)

Here, Priya links back to the core theme from Chapter 8 about how estranged students differ from most non-estranged students in their need to look ahead and financially plan for their futures in advance. However, the reactive approach to support (Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009) here fails to acknowledge these unique and complex financial needs that estranged students have, automatically excluding them from support that would help to relieve some of these temporal economic pressures. Overall, these narratives surrounding the challenges of applying for institutional hardship funds echo the issues that many estranged students have historically faced when trying to access Student Finance, and the ways that they have to 'prove' themselves as worthy of support, or risk persecution (Spacey, 2020; Weale, 2018). As such, there is a need for universities to be proactive in making sure their generic support mechanisms can accommodate for estranged students' unique economic circumstances to prevent this group facing further financial disadvantages in higher education.

9.3.2 Issues with wellbeing services

Furthermore, the estranged students in this study commonly identified that their institution offered counselling and general wellbeing initiatives. The student population as a whole is increasingly experiencing mental health difficulties (Frampton & Smithies, 2022; Lewis & Bolton, 2024) and this has resulted in a greater demand for universities to provide wellbeing support (see Chapter 5 and Chapter 7). However, for the seven estranged students in this study who accessed their university's counselling service or tried to engage in student wellbeing activities, their experience was overwhelmingly poor.

The students described their university's counselling service with frustration, which stemmed from inadequate processes that were struggling with the demand from students, and did not take their estrangement circumstances into account. For example, when Beth asked her university for a counselling session during lockdown in 2021, she was offered a single session: *"I was just a bit underwhelmed by how much they thought that one hour session was the best they could do"* (Beth, int 2). Here, there is a risk that fundamentally inadequate support offered to estranged students could be more detrimental for their wellbeing, and their sense of how they are perceived by their institution, than having no support at all. Similarly, Dani and Hollie described going in circles with their university's counselling services that delayed them from receiving support. Dani had her initial consultation appointment repeat four times before her first official session and described the university's approach as *"a bit all over the place"* (Dani, int 1). Hollie's university reset their counselling service each academic year, and the need to re-explain her estrangement circumstances with a new counsellor in her second year discouraged her from accessing that support:

> *"you have to apply again and I just don't want to keep talking about it because it just brings it up again, I'm just oh my god, I was like 'can you not just use my notes from last time and just give it to this person?', like it makes so much sense, they're like 'no we can't'. Might just make them a PowerPoint, like this is where it went wrong [laughs] help!"* (Hollie, int 1).

These students' narratives highlight the ways that university systems can be designed in ways that fragment the support that students receive across academic years. Echoing earlier discussions, the short-termism that universities adopt is particularly ineffective for supporting the long-term, calendar year-long support needs of estranged students. Moreover, the need to re-apply and repeat their estrangement or mental health circumstances frequently to receive support mirrors the challenges that arise when estranged students accessing financial support need to disclose and 'prove' their estrangement status (Bland, 2018; Spacey, 2020). Counselling has been found to be a positive intervention for estranged people generally (see L. Blake, Rouncefield-Swales et al., 2023), but the short-term

cyclical timelines that universities adopt risk causing further harm to estranged students' wellbeing by placing repeated pressures to share their potential trauma with others. These university practices perpetuate the stigmatisation of estrangement in the university field (Barnwell, 2024; Scharp & Dorrance Hall, 2017) and ultimately discourage estranged students from seeking support.

Stigmatisation of estrangement caused by the university's mismanagement of their students' sensitive circumstances also arose in narratives about wellbeing initiatives. Four of the participants described how their university regularly advertised and held wellbeing events. In themselves, these regular reminders are intended to normalise mental health challenges for students and empower them to seek support with their wellbeing (Lewis & Bolton, 2024, p. 40). However, Rhys described how pushing this support too strongly may unintentionally create further issues, speaking in his interview about how he received a wellbeing-related email every single day:

> *"I find the mental health emails that I receive quite overwhelming because the volume of them is insane this year. Although it's in their best interests, and they're trying to do the right thing, personally I found that a bit too much"* (Rhys, int 1)

Rhys's perspective reminded me of Yoda, a second year Law student who participated in my undergraduate dissertation research. When asked about how his university supported him with his mental health, Yoda shared how *"Labelling and stigma are a hard pill to swallow and constant emails checking up on you and telling you to do this and do that are a nightmare"* (Key, 2018, p. 75). These estranged students' perspectives highlight a need for universities to strike a balance between ensuring students are aware of and encouraged to access support when needed, while not infantilising and placing a 'deficit' label (Smit, 2012) on estranged students. It also suggests an interesting gendered dimension to these experiences, as the social stigma around estrangement may exacerbate the stigma that male students commonly face when asking for help with their mental health (Wolstenholme, 2024).

9.3.3   Issues with academic support

Institutional misunderstandings of the unique perspectives of estranged students in support mechanisms continued into the participants' narratives around engaging with academic support.   As explored in Chapter 8, a common response to estranged students' issues of managing their academic work alongside challenging personal temporal periods was to 'push back' their work, such as by extending assignment deadlines, changing placement timetables, and deferring assessments to the summer.   Students who need adjustments are seen as problematic within universities (Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009), and the one-size-fits-all approach to 'push back' academic commitments is at temporal odds with the unique ways that estranged students are continuously looking ahead and managing their resources to ensure their long-term survival.

Alongside support to manage their academic work in the present, many universities offer a careers service providing advice for students seeking job opportunities during and after their studies. Given that many estranged students are orientated towards the future and begin to develop plans for post-graduation during their studies (see Chapter 11), careers services could play a strong role in aiding estranged students' transitions out of university. However, Priya described her challenging experiences with a careers advisor from her university who responded negatively to her focus on securing economic stability post-graduation, rather than finding a career she was interested in:

> *"I felt like I was the abnormal one and like I was the crazy one because I'm telling him that I want to get a job that has the least amount of work for the most amount of pay [...] instead of trying to answer the question he's like 'aw that's very strange, normally people come here and want to do things that they have an interest in' and it's like 'okay that's not me, can you help me?'"*
> (Priya, int 2)

Priya's narrative highlights how support in different departments across the university may lack a nuanced and empathetic approach towards the unique

perspectives that estranged and other non-traditional students may have during their studies. Indeed, the discourse that students have the 'safety net' of the family's 'home' that they can draw upon after their studies (Butler & Muir, 2017; Lewis et al., 2016) and take time to find work they want if needed results in the marginalisation of estranged students as *"abnormal"* within higher education.

9.3.4   Issues with housing support

The final facet of institutional support to be discussed is with housing. In the existing literature on estranged students' support, much of the emphasis is on the ways that estranged students may benefit from their university's housing support, such as help to find accommodation and guarantor schemes (e.g. Spacey & Sanderson, 2022; Y. Taylor & Costa, 2019). In contrast, four participants were aware of this support (see Table 9.1 on page 209), but it was only sought out by two students. Finn described a positive experience asking their university for advice when at risk of homelessness earlier in their studies, which demonstrated how universities providing proactive housing support to estranged students can act as a 'safety net' to prevent slipping into homelessness (Key, 2019). However, Sophie tried to access her university's accommodation service to find housing at the beginning of her studies, but *"it was very disorganised and like, there were a lot of issues"* (Sophie, int 1). As a result, she had to seek emergency housing and experienced "abuse" (Sophie, int 1) from her housemates, before moving in with her partner two months later. Sophie's narrative highlight how shortfalls in institutional support can leave estranged students at risk of traumatic housing experiences and mean that they have to draw upon alternative support.

Indeed, there was an overall lack of involvement with university housing support in this sample compared to previous studies with estranged students. This may come from their unique accommodation circumstances and needs that universities are less equipped to assist with. In a social work context, Aaslund (2021) described how institutional housing support often aims to 'allocate someone an allocation, [rather] than to help them establish a home' (p. 75). This approach works well

for students who have a 'family home' to return to in moments of crisis or during the holidays (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005; Kenyon, 1999) but cannot adequately support the needs of estranged students. However, Sophie's narrative highlights how universities can also fall short in this 'allocation' process and leave estranged students at risk of homelessness, and instead she had to draw upon relational support she had built outside of the university to have a secure 'home' (Mallett, 2004). The significance of creating 'home' and the role of relational support in constructing this for the students in this study will be explored in Chapter 10.

9.4 External support with intersectional needs

Existing literature on estranged students' engagement with formal support is exclusively focused on what is provided by their university, rather than considering the wider scope of support that students engage with. A strength of this longitudinal narrative study was the identification of external formal student support that the participants accessed as a result of their intersectional characteristics: three of the participants drew upon Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA), and two had access to statutory support for care leavers. While these support mechanisms were not a significant part of the participants' narratives, they raise novel insights into how formal support designed for other widening participation student groups may fall short in acknowledging estranged students' unique needs; or how this support can provide positive provision that universities could take note of to improve their support for estranged students. This final section will explore how the estranged students perceived these additional support schemes in turn.

Sophie, Hollie, and Beth all received DSA, which provided each of them with tailored support for their disabilities. DSA is a subsidiary fund from SLC that students can apply for, covering up to £27,000 of additional costs that arise as a result of their disabilities with learning (GOV.UK, n.d.; M. Taylor et al., 2016). Any disabled student can apply for DSA separately to their maintenance loan and receive a specific amount that goes towards covering their unique needs, rather

than being tied to their income. The three estranged students on DSA received a mentor to assist with study skills and emotional support, and Hollie also received a laptop with special software to support her learning. Sophie spoke fondly about her mentor, reflecting on how *"we're quite close and we're a similar age [...] there's a lot of relatability and common understanding"* (Sophie, int 1). This demonstrates how dynamic and relational support can be beneficial to non-traditional students in higher education (Raaper et al., 2022) and may be particularly so for estranged students who cannot draw upon this kind of social capital from their families (Costa et al., 2020a). In contrast, Hollie felt that her interactions with her mentor were *"forced [...] I feel like I'm just wasting her time"* (Hollie, int 1). A power dynamic between formal institutions and individual students becomes apparent here, with a sense that students may feel that the support offered to them through DSA *must* be taken to have their barriers to participation in higher education validated, regardless of whether that support is effective in supporting their personal needs. In particular, the intersection of disability with estrangement can create unique temporal needs for support that are unrecognised by student support mechanisms, as Beth shared that *"my mentor that I get through DSA was also off for the summer because that's only covered in term time for some bizarre reason"* (Beth, int 2). Beth's narrative highlights a temporal mismatch between estranged students who are situated within calendar time and traditional student support that only works on a cyclical academic year timeline. Gaps in support during the holidays are perceived as *"bizarre"* by estranged students, while their year-round support needs are 'problematic' within the higher education field (Bourdieu, 1990; Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009).

For Kate and Dani whose estrangement intersected with care experience and had formal 'Care Leaver' status, they were entitled to statutory support from their local authority. In England, local councils have a legal requirement to provide all care leavers with a personalised Pathway Plan and access to a personal advisor (PA) from when they exit the care system up to the age of 25 (Foley et al., 2024). The resources offered by PAs can be material, such as providing funds or housing, or pastoral emotional support, acting as a 'corporate parent' to support young

care-experienced people with their transition into society (Simpson & Murphy, 2022). Throughout this longitudinal study, Dani and Kate spoke about the role their PAs played during their university studies. For Dani, her relationship with her PA was entirely transactional, with delays to reimbursements causing her frustration: *"my PA from social services was meant to message me but she hasn't. It would be nice if she did [...] Its judt extra unwanted and unneeded stress"* (Dani, Jul21 diary). On the other hand, Kate had a strong relationship with her PA, who she described as *"my step-in mum [...] if I had a problem that I would call my mum for, she's the person that I'd call"* (Kate, int 1). As lockdown restrictions eased during the study, she began to have in-person visits with her PA, and in her second interview she spoke about how *"it never feels like I'm having a you know state-sanctioned visit, it feels like I've got a friend round to actually see me"* (Kate, int 2). Kate's experience demonstrates how being offered a consistent 'safety net' from the state in the form of a PA who becomes a consistent supportive figure, in the way that family often is for students (Azaola, 2020; Raaper et al., 2022), can be beneficial to care leavers navigating the higher education system. However, the gap in support that care experienced students face as a result of being ineligible for this formal support (see Baker, 2024a; N. Harrison et al., 2021) will also impact estranged students, who face similar experiential challenges with navigating higher education without family support to care experienced students (see Cotton et al., 2014; Hauari et al., 2019). Dedicated estrangement teams and university support mechanisms are well-placed to fill this gap for estranged students during their studies, but only if they can adequately respond to the unique material and emotional support needs that individual students have.

9.5 Conclusion

This chapter explored the formal support mechanisms that estranged students could access, including dedicated estrangement support and generalised support for the entire student population.

Despite being considered the gold standard, dedicated support for estranged students received mixed reviews by the participants in this study, as it frequently viewed them as a homogenised group and did not support their individual needs in practice. Moreover, the participants highlighted how generic university support assumed all students faced the same 'problems' that could be 'fixed' through blanket mechanisms (Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009; Smit, 2012). This generalised support did not consider the participants' unique circumstances and was near-universally seen as inadequate by the students.

There exists a delicate balance of universities offering support while not being an overbearing and ineffective 'corporate parent'. When framing estranged students as having problems that need 'fixing' as a result of their absence of family, universities continue to marginalise estrangement in policy and practice. The provision of underwhelming and inadequate support perpetuates the homogenised deficit model that estranged students have zero capitals and are entirely dependent on their institution. The next chapter will explore how, in practice, estranged students can be empowered to build their own support mechanisms.

CHAPTER 10

BUILDING SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

In Chapter 9, the role that universities play in supporting estranged students through their higher education journeys was explored. This is the primary focus of existing literature about support for estranged students, where the goal was to advise universities how to implement and improve their widening participation policies, resulting in limited exploration of the wider forms of support that estranged students engage with. However, this perspective risks framing estranged students as a passive consumer of university support mechanisms in the 'absence' of family capital, with little consideration of other research which explores how students actively create alternative resources that they can deploy during their studies (Clegg et al., 2006; Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009).

Building upon this existing work, this chapter will address the final research question, *What support do estranged students engage with during their studies?*, from the perspective of how estranged students build supportive relationships for themselves. The broad longitudinal scope of this study and prioritisation of estranged students' narratives enabled exploration of not just how they engaged with the support offered to them, but how the participants actively built a wider system of social support throughout their studies. These perspectives help to break down the passive deficit model that estranged students are studying 'lacking' support in higher education (e.g. Buttle UK, 2022; Costa et al., 2020a) and are completely reliant on their university; instead uplifting the voices of estranged students who emphasised how they created and maintained relational support over time. As such, this study adds the perspectives of estranged students into the growing research field exploring how non-traditional students place significance on their relationships with friends and family (e.g. Bathmaker et al., 2016; Marvell & Child, 2023; Raaper et al., 2022).

This chapter will explore why estranged students feel the need to build support for themselves, rather than exclusively relying on the support offered by their institutions. It then discusses how the participants of this study created support mechanisms through supportive relationships, and with whom they cultivated those relationships.

10.1 The importance of building support

10.1.1 Self-reliance

For some of the participants, a drive to build their own support mechanisms, rather than relying wholly on their institution, came from a desire to be self-reliant. There were two primary perspectives behind this desire. Some students framed their ability to be self-reliant as one of empowerment and personal strength. For example, Nadia spoke about how *"I don't feel like I need people to sort of lead me through life [...] I've always been quite independent"* (Nadia, int 1), while Kate described how studying without family support was *"an extremely difficult thing that involves a lot of willpower"* (Kate, Feb21 diary). This lens echoes the ways that many of the students rejected negative stereotypes surrounding family estrangement (e.g. Rittenour et al., 2018) and embraced the strengths of independence that these circumstances gave them, as explored in Chapter 7. Nadia and Kate's narratives of support stem from a forward-looking perspective focused on autonomy and agency when creating their own support systems, demonstrating a willingness to construct a life for themselves within and beyond the institution. Within this perspective, institutional support was just one component of a larger toolbox that they drew upon to help them succeed at university.

On the other hand, Beth and Hollie viewed their self-reliance as a necessary response to their support needs being stigmatised in the higher education field. For example, when discussing her challenges in accessing adequate support at her university, Beth shared how *"most of the time I just kind of rely on me"* (Beth, int 2).

Hollie echoed this sentiment, describing how *"I've gotten to the point where I just don't want to bother people with my shit anymore"* (Hollie, int 1). This positionality as a *"bother"* or *"burden"* (see Mackenzie & Unite Foundation, 2022) on others was shaped by their negative experiences engaging in a society where family estrangement is perceived as problematic and deviant (K. R. Allen & Henderson, 2016; Hugman, 2022). Rather than engaging with university support systems, which adopt a deficit model and view differing habituses as problems that need 'fixing' (Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009; Smit, 2012), estranged students seek support elsewhere.

10.1.2   Creating a 'home'

The importance of building supportive relationships also stemmed from a desire to create their own 'home'. The notion of 'home' as a space associated with stability, personal identity, and belonging (K.-A. Allen et al., 2022; Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Wright, 1993) as part of family life was explored in Chapter 3. University students in the UK often perceive their student 'home' on campus to be less significant than their family 'home home' (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005; Kenyon, 1999) but can use both to fluidly move between the academic and family 'fields' during their studies. However, for estranged students who are not in contact with parents, these frequent transitions 'back home' do not exist in the same way.

The importance of constructing a 'home' for themselves was identified as a theme early in the study when analysing students' narratives on their past and present housing experiences. The flexibility granted by the longitudinal research design allowed me to explicitly ask the participants a follow-up question about what 'home' meant to them, rather than making assumptions and falling into a 'language trap' (Bernardes, 1997). Two core themes emerged from the seven students' answers: home as a personal, safe place they had ownership of; and home as a shared, social place tied to supportive others. Figure 10.1 on the following page provides an overview of the participants' responses within these themes.

Home as a personal, safe place they had ownership of

> *"where you feel at ease, where you feel safe, protected, comfortable"* (Sophie, final diary)

> *"somewhere I can relax, feel safe and call my own"* (Dani, final diary)

> *"a place with a room that's yours"* (Asha, int 2)

> *"a place where i can always feel safe in and return too"* (Priya, final diary)

> *"the place you feel comfortable most"* (Beth, final diary)

Home as a shared, social place tied to supportive others

> *"I find my home in the people I surround myself with"* (Kate, final diary)

> *"I associate home a lot with my partner, you know I feel at home wherever I go with them"* (Finn, int 2)

Figure 10.1: Responses to 'What does home mean to you?' from their final diary entry or interview

These findings demonstrate how the familial notion of 'home' is still significant to estranged students. 'Home' is a concept that they redefine for themselves, replacing the significance of biological family with a focus towards themselves and others who support them in a familial way. With the components of safety and comfort (Mallett, 2004) of 'home' met, estranged students can begin to cultivate a positive 'home' environment during their studies. The ability to create a 'home' environment during their studies can be an important source of empowerment that enables estranged students to create a 'differentiated self' away from their more troubled 'home' pasts (Agllias, 2017a). When estranged students grew up with challenging experiences in their 'family home' (e.g. Melvin, 2024) and saw the transition to higher education as one of freedom and liberation (as explored in Chapter 7), creating their own 'home' can be an important personal goal. As universities cannot assist with these emotive needs, their creation of 'home' was facilitated by those who they built supportive relationships with.

10.2   Supportive relationships

The remainder of this chapter will explore who estranged students formed supportive relationships with during their studies. A summary of relationships mentioned by the participants is found in Table 10.1 on the next page. The focus of this discussion will be on personal relational connections, rather than on formal support they sought out from institutions (i.e. charities and private mental health services). This section will discuss estranged students' relationships with teaching staff, peers, biological family, romantic partners, and pets.

Table 10.1: Types of support that the estranged students mentioned they had built with others, inside and outside of their university

	Support	Beth	Rhys	Priya	Kate	Sophie	Asha	Dani	Finn	Hollie	Nadia
Within university	Teaching staff	✓			✓		✓		✓		✓
	Classmates	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
	Peers from societies		✓	✓		✓					✓
	Housemates						✓	✓		✓	
Beyond university	Friends made prior to studies	✓		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓
	Friends made during studies in local community				✓				✓		
	Non-parental family members		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓
	Romantic partner				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Partner's family					✓		✓	✓	✓	✓
	Pets and animals					✓		✓		✓	✓
	Mental health services	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓				
	Charities	✓	✓								

10.2.1 Teaching staff

Five of the students identified a member of teaching staff for whom their previously formal and academic relationship had transformed into something much closer and more supportive. For example, Kate identified one of her teachers who provided academic and pastoral support during her studies, explaining that she *"could talk to her about anything, and she's obviously aware of like everything that goes on, so I don't really ever have to explain myself to her"* (Kate, int 1). These supportive relationships with teaching staff had the potential to be perceived as 'familial', which came through in Beth's description of her tutor: *"I obviously wouldn't describe him as my dad but I kinda look at him as like a father figure type [...] he's more of a mentor than a teacher to me because of the support that he gives"* (Beth, int 1). These narratives highlight how, for estranged students, teachers may transcend their formal role of transmitting cultural capital and knowledge to also provide consistent emotional support typically associated with family (Scharp & McLaren, 2017; Waithaka, 2014). As individuals who connect with students on a regular basis, teaching staff have been identified in existing literature of support as core relational figures who can provide mentoring as a 'wise sympathetic other' (Jacklin & Le Riche, 2009, p. 743) for non-traditional students trying to find a sense of belonging at university (e.g. Thomas, 2006). Indeed, the rapport built between teachers and estranged students during day-to-day 'micro-moments' (Ajjawi et al., 2024) can help to foster a supportive relationship where estranged students feel able to disclose their family circumstances and seek practical and emotional support. Compared to their challenges engaging with formal university support offerings, as discussed in Chapter 8, estranged students hold more agency when building supportive relationships with the individual staff members they see in day-to-day student life.

However, while many students tried to build supportive relationships with their teachers, barriers arose when constructing personal connections in a neoliberal higher education system. For example, Beth also identified female teaching staff who provided advice and empathy on how she could manage her workload, but she

shared how *"I love that they're understanding, but understanding doesn't get me my degree"* (Beth, int 2). Positioning students as consumers attending university to acquire a degree pushes student-teacher experiences towards being transactional rather than relational, shifting the focus towards support that will deliver desirable outcomes for their studies (Tait, 2000). Furthermore, the temporal impact of the pandemic limited how far estranged students could build these relational networks with their academic tutors through unplanned chats and frequent contact. Finn reflected on how prior to lockdown, *"we could just walk up and ask them a question, it was a lot simpler in that respect"* (Finn, int 1). The loss of 'micro-moments' (Ajjawi et al., 2024) and the lack of opportunities to build informal connections with their tutors while studying remotely may significantly restrict how students can build these kinds of relationships. Future research should explore how estranged students learning remotely can recreate these 'micro-moments' and build these supportive relationships with teaching staff at a distance (Tait, 2014).

10.2.2 Peers

Another core source of support in the estranged students' narratives was the vast range of friendships they held, both within and outside the university 'field' (Bourdieu, 1982/2019). The longitudinal design of this study was able to explore the fluid and active ways estranged students nurtured strong friendships and maintained them over time. For example, the regular contact between estranged students and their classmates was an opportunity to create close bonds. Dani spoke about how *"I see my friends more than I'd see my family anyway so I actually get more of a hands-on support network"* (Dani, int 2), highlighting how she viewed frequent communication with her university peers as a kind of familial 'practice' (D. H. J. Morgan, 1996; Vangelisti, 2022). These relationships were dynamic and evolving for Finn during their studies. In their first interview, Finn shared how their classmates were *"not like as close as family connections would be, nothing really stands up to that mark"* (Finn, int 1), but their later diary entries illustrated how these relationships were solidified over time:

> *"They [classmates] are more my family despite only knowing them for a couple of years, they get me and support me more than I can explain"* (Finn, Feb21 diary)

> *"I miss my uni friend [name], she's almost like a younger sister to me now [...] we support each other through the harder parts of uni, like family would"* (Finn, Aug21 diary)

These narratives highlight the fluid and evolving relationships that estranged students have with their peers at university, and how their construct of 'family' evolves to include new people over time. Building upon the existing research that highlights how friendships between students can help to facilitate a sense of institutional belonging (e.g. Meehan & Howells, 2019; Read et al., 2020), these findings show how friendships at university hold a deep personal significance for estranged students, allowing the curation of 'families of choice' (Heaphy, 2016; Weeks et al., 1999) and a sense of 'home' during their studies.

However, the regular contact with other students did not always translate to friendships being considered as 'familial' or supportive relationships. Estranged students' awareness of their positionality as 'different' from their peers who had traditional family support, as explored in Chapter 8, exacerbated feelings of exclusion within the institutional 'field' for some:

> *"at the end of the day they can still mention their parents and going home [...] I do speak to my friends like in terms of just generally 'how are you doing' kinda thing, but rely on them? I wouldn't really class them as a support network"* (Beth, int 1)

Beth's narrative exposes how her non-traditional student experience as an estranged single parent meant that everyday discussions with her peers could trigger feelings of alienation and prevent the formation of close supportive friendships, an experience echoed in existing research on mature students (Mallman & Lee, 2017; Read et al., 2003). As family ideology permeates the entire

higher education field, both institutions and other students perpetuate a homogenised view of what family support students 'should' have.

Moreover, feelings of exclusion also arose for estranged students with student housemates, often due to their mismatched perceptions around the importance of 'home'. The estranged students in this research prioritised the creation of a safe and comfortable 'home' environment, which is at odds with the normative student conceptualisation of their university 'home' as temporary and less significant than their family 'home home' (Holdsworth & Morgan, 2005; Kenyon, 1999). This mismatch was particularly prominent for Asha, who described how she had previously curated a strong family-like relationship with her housemate. When experiencing conflict with this housemate in her second year, she found it especially difficult to navigate:

> *"that's basically my home having issues. We were like sisters, my chosen family, and I can't just go home and get relief by living with my parents like others can"* (Asha, Mar21 diary)

Asha temporarily moved out from their shared house following this argument (see Figure 8.1 on page 192) and wrote in her diary about how *"I felt quite homesick for my student house"* (Asha, Apr21 diary). This is an important example of how negative shifts in estranged students' relationships with peers may physically displace and emotionally ruin the 'home' they cultivated through relational support. Asha's story of how 'home' was threatened by relationship breakdowns is reminiscent of the fears shared by Scottish care experienced and estranged students in Minty et al. (2022): when drawing upon relational support from friends for housing, they were worried about taking advantage of them and had a strong desire to not *"overstay your welcome"* (estranged student in Minty et al., 2022, p. 35). As such, compared to a more permanent familial 'safety net' (Chambers, 2012; Finch & Mason, 1993), supportive relationships with peers were more vulnerable, and came with a risk of perpetuating past trauma of an unstable 'home' if students were over-reliant on friends.

Temporally, the disconnect between estranged students and their university peers was especially apparent in their narratives during the holidays, when their friends *"travelled home for a while. So it's not like I have many people to talk to"* (Dani, Feb21 diary). To accommodate for the gaps in support created by academic 'time' (Adam, 1990), six of the students identified core supportive relationships that they maintained year-round with individuals outside the university field. These included friends they met prior to their studies and actively maintained supportive relationships with, such as Sophie regularly travelling to visit her friends in other cities outside of term-time. At a time of mental health crisis, Nadia's friends from school *"drove up to see me and it was really nice [...] even though I feel really trapped and really alone, I've got friends who I can speak to"* (Nadia, int 1). Furthermore, Kate and Finn identified friends that they had made in their local communities outside of their university during their studies, demonstrating a sense of maturity and integration with their wider social world for students who live off campus. The dynamic friendships that estranged students have are often downplayed and ignored in family-dominated discourses where estranged students are framed as 'lacking' support (Costa et al., 2020a). However, these findings have illustrated how estranged students build and draw upon a vast system of support within and outside their university in diverse ways, just as many other non-traditional students do (e.g. Bathmaker et al., 2016; Raaper et al., 2022).

10.2.3 Non-parental family members

Although the definitions of estrangement in higher education only refer to an absence of parent-child relationships, there remains an assumption that estranged students have *no* family support during their studies. As a result, estranged students are framed as having a 'lack of social and economic capitals' from their family as a whole (Costa et al., 2020b, p. 869). However, most of the estranged students in this study maintained supportive relationships with at least one non-parental family member. For example, Priya shared multiple instances where her grandmother came to visit her on campus when she was struggling with her mental health in her diaries, and Dani reflected on how she spoke to her biological

aunt and grandmother *"an awful lot"* (Dani, int 1). The strongest example of non-parental family support came from Rhys, who shared how *"I have quite strong relations to my extended family [...] I have got a fairly normal support network in that sense, it just excludes my parents"* (Rhys, int 1). These students could frequently and reliably draw upon emotional support from their family similar to their non-estranged peers (e.g. Azaola, 2020; Bland & Stevenson, 2018). These narratives highlight the diversity of lived experiences with family estrangement, and counter the homogenous perspective that all estranged young people are completely isolated from the 'capitals' in their 'family field' (Atkinson, 2014; Bourdieu, 1984/2021) throughout their student experience.

However, contact with non-parental family did not always translate to support that students could draw upon when needed during their studies. As explored in Chapter 7, although Finn was actively undergoing a reconciliation process and rebuilding a relationship with their father, it was not consistent enough that they could ask for support from him: *"I can't seek aid from family as they don't understand why I am different and why I seem to have so many issues"* (Finn, Feb21 diary)[1]. Similarly, Hollie had tried to build a relationship with her aunt that was reminiscent of a traditional mother-child support bond, but this had fallen short: *"at my age like you want a mum to talk, ring up and talk to, I didn't really get that [...] I didn't really wanna ring her"* (Hollie, int 1). These narratives hold emotive weight around an absence of the 'normal' parental support their peers can access, which is emphasised in Nadia's narrative about her relationship with her distant aunts and uncles:

> *"they feel like strangers [...] it doesn't feel like they're family or anything, they're sort of like these adults that I have if anything does go wrong, but at the same time I don't feel like I would want to fall back on them, I don't really know who they are"* (Nadia, int 1)

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[1]In this quote, *"why I am different"* likely refers to Finn's gender identity and/or disabilities. However, as discussed in Chapter 6, I did not collect demographic data or data on how students intersected with other marginalised characteristics, so it is impossible to say with certainty.

These examples highlight how their relationships with other family could not always replicate the ideological reverence of parent-child relationships (Edwards & Gillies, 2012; Steel et al., 2012). As such, while they may maintain contact with some members of their biological family, these relationships may be more similar to those they hold with their institution, as distant bodies who can offer support in a crisis, rather than a strong, supportive, 'familial' relationship.

Moreover, relationships with biological family members could fall short in facilitating the creation of a safe and secure 'home' for estranged students. Hollie moved in with her aunt during the university holidays, but it did not feel like returning to her 'family home': *"the last like four years of my life, I've always been a guest somewhere, even though you know, my aunt's still my family she's like 'you're not a guest' so I was like 'yeah, but it's not really my house is it'"* (Hollie, int 1). This experience of being a 'guest' in a place that others would perceive as her 'family home' emphasises how estranged young people may experience emotional homelessness despite having a house to live in and family to live with (Waterman, 2019), due to the lack of ownership over those spaces. A sense of losing autonomy by living with her aunt was echoed in her last diary entry, where she wrote about how *"i am not looking forward to [living with aunt over the Easter holiday] because shes so controlling and treats me like a child and that frustrates me so much!"* (Hollie, Apr21 diary). Indeed, though the transition 'back home' is associated with respite from the pressures of independent living for most students, Hollie instead dreads regressing back to a time when she was *"a child"* in the difficult 'family field', before being empowered through higher education. Hollie's narrative highlights how the discourse around university holidays and the expectations for students to 'go home' within higher education pressures estranged students to lose their sense of 'escape' (Sinko et al., 2022) that the university 'field' provides; and may echo the insecure and fractured 'homes' that they experienced in youth (Robinson, 2005).

Narratives about non-parental family support in this study highlight the importance of agency for estranged students recreating 'family' support. Non-traditional students in other research have identified family support as significant for them

(e.g. Bathmaker et al., 2016; Wilcox et al., 2005) and have reiterated the ideological discourse around unconditional love from family that promotes the importance of these relationships in society (e.g. Boddy, 2019; Sunak, 2023). However, the presence of family relationships does not necessarily equate to unproblematic and unconditional support. The distinction here is that for students with positive family experiences, their family is often an authentic and mutually 'relational' support network (Raaper et al., 2022). In contrast, estranged students often benefit more from the close relationships they build for themselves, than from the strained familial relationships they are 'given'.

10.2.4 Partners and their family

For seven of the participants in this study, their most significant support relationship was with their long-term romantic partners. Sophie and Finn described their partners as a *"rock"* (Sophie, Mar21 diary; Finn, int 1) and Kate called her boyfriend *"my go to for everything"* (Kate, int 1), highlighting the prominent position of romantic partners as a source of pastoral support during their studies. In her narrative, Dani elaborated on the significance of her boyfriend's support, sharing how *"he's been with me through an awful lot and he knows about my past and everything and he supports me through it all"* (Dani, int 1). Compared to the transient or 'weak ties' (Kanagavel, 2019) that estranged students may build with teaching staff and friends at their institution, or with distant family members, partners were framed as strong relationships that provided stability in all facets of life including with their studies. There is little exploration into the supportive role that romantic partners can play in students' lives in the literature compared to the role of family and friends, likely due to the normative constructions of studenthood around young people for whom romantic relationships are more casual or distant from their academic lives. However, for estranged students who are orientated towards building a 'home' and preparing for their futures, romantic partners adopt the core support role that non-estranged students often receive from their parents.

A central role of estranged students' partners was assisting with the creation of a 'home' that students felt 'proud' of. For example, when describing her housing decisions made with her boyfriend, Dani said *"I'd much rather do the extra travel [to university] and have a place where I can be proud of, instead of living somewhere where may be closer to uni but looks like hell"* (Dani, int 2). In her narrative, Dani takes agency in choosing accommodation that prioritises her personal needs over her academic needs, situating herself in her own 'home' with her chosen family. Similarly, in her first interview Nadia reflected on the challenges she had in creating a space she felt 'proud' of when living in a studio flat, compared to the larger home she now shared with her boyfriend:

> *"it still feels like a little bit embarrassing when you have your friends over and you're living in this tiny little cramped place and you have to say 'okay let's all like sleep on sofa' and so, I don't know it just feels really not nice. But here I've actually got like space and I've got like a living room [...] we can actually like sit down together properly and feel nice and hang out, so it feels a lot better"* (Nadia, int 1)

These students' narratives emphasise the unique importance of 'displaying' (Finch, 2007) a home during their studies for estranged students compared to most of their non-estranged peers who have a separate 'family home' available. Thus, the desire to create a 'home' discouraged estranged students from staying in university halls, which are designed for temporary lodging in term-time, instead seeking a space they could actively co-create with their partners.

However, some of the students described how their romantic relationships were not always unconditionally supportive. In particular, the participants described conflicts with their partners, who were not students, about their struggles at university that resulted in support gaps. For example, Hollie described how her boyfriend can be *"quite ignorant sometimes because he doesn't like try and understand [...] he's just sat there saying 'grow up'"* (Hollie, int 1), particularly when she sought emotional support from him about her feelings of exclusion and lack of belonging at her university. Similarly, Nadia reflected on how her boyfriend *"thinks my current*

[politics] degree is useless and sometimes makes me feel like I wont go anywhere in life [...] I have no one else around to assure me otherwise" (Nadia, Jan21 diary). These narratives echo some of the gaps in support faced by other non-traditional students when seeking academic guidance from their parents due to disparities in 'habitus' between the university and the family 'fields' (Atkinson, 2014; Reay, 1998). As family ideology positions families as the holistic source of wisdom and support for young people navigating complex circumstances in their academic and personal lives (Aquilino, 1997; Israelashvili & Mozes, 2022), it can be challenging for estranged students to know where else to turn for support when their core recreated 'family' (their romantic relationships) experience conflict.

Alongside building 'family' with their partners, some students also identified supportive relationships with their partner's biological family, often comparing these stable and more normative families with their own troubled family histories. Finn shared how their partner's family was *"a lot closer and a lot more supportive of us than my parents"* (Finn, Dec20 diary), while Dani described the ways that *"my boyfriend's family love me like I'm family"* (Dani, Sep21 diary), highlighting family 'practices' such as when they brought her a souvenir back from holiday. These narratives showcase the ways that estranged young people can exhibit agency in building a reciprocal relationship with others, and how they can integrate into other pre-established families through familial 'practices' (D. H. J. Morgan, 1996) which translate into practical and emotional support.

In contrast, Nadia and Hollie described an emotional tension against feeling a true sense of inclusion and belonging within their partner's family. This was most poignant in Nadia's narrative:

> *"when I'm with my boyfriend and his family and stuff, I still feel like, you know I'm not part of the family, do you know what I mean? You're, I'm still an outsider looking in [...] I'm not part of their family, as much as they include me and stuff I'm still not like one of them"* (Nadia, int 1)

In this, Nadia identified a gap between the way that her partner's family practised and 'displayed' (Finch, 2007) family with her, and how far she personally saw them as family. Being granted an alternative family support network does not necessarily provide an equal and adequate 'replacement' and should not be automatically seen as such. Indeed, the literature that explores the ways that LGBTQ+ people create and negotiate 'families of choice' in mutual and democratic ways (Heaphy, 2016; Weston, 1997), highlighting the importance of constructed family relationships holding reciprocal weight by all involved parties. For Hollie and Nadia, there was a sense that, despite being accepted into a family that aimed to treat them as equals, they did not feel truly welcomed. This disparity may stem from the students' internalised family ideology casting the 'replacement' family relationships as illegitimate. However, the explanation could be more nuanced — family ideology is concerned with 'the family' or 'your family', phrasing which automatically rules out the possibility of existing in multiple families simultaneously. As such, for an estranged student who is still processing the trauma and 'ambiguous loss' (Agllias, 2011) of their 'original family', accepting that they belong in this 'replacement family' requires giving up any hope for reconciliation.

10.2.5 Pets

Finally, an unanticipated but significant supportive relationship described by four of the estranged students was with their pets. Sophie regularly wrote in her diary about the emotional support she received from her pet hamsters, who *"makes me very happy"* (Sophie, Jul21 diary) and *"helped me feel less isolated as of late"* (Sophie, Jan21 diary). After moving in with her boyfriend, Dani adopted rabbits in the summer of 2021 and wrote about how *"they are my main motivation to get out of bed in the morning"* (Dani, Aug21 diary). Alongside these day-to-day moments of support, Dani and Nadia labelled their pets as part of their 'family'. For example, Nadia reflected on her relationship with the kittens she cared for during lockdown in her interview:

> *"[cats] make up for the feeling of family that I really want. It sounds a bit sad but they make you feel really happy"* (Nadia, int 1)

Indeed, the safety, consistency, and reliability of pets as housemates can help estranged students create a 'home'. As Nadia explained:

> *"they're also not like people who are gonna be horrible to you, they're just cats and they just follow me around the house"*

These narratives echo wider literature about how the unconditional love and care from a pet can enable young people to view pets as their 'family' (e.g. McConnell et al., 2019), and the beneficial role that pets play in reducing anxiety and increasing motivation for people who struggle with their mental health (e.g. Hawkins et al., 2021; Schmitz et al., 2021). The stability of a pet with predictable needs, and who will not suddenly instigate conflict, can provide empowering support in the creation of a secure emotional 'home' in the higher education field.

However, these aspects raise concerns around how far estranged young people in university halls can build these supportive relationships with animals. Student accommodation typically prohibits pets, meaning those who follow a more 'normative' student experience may be unable to form these personal bonds with animals in the same way. This was the case for Hollie, who chose to volunteer at a local animal shelter and wanted to create a student society for others to do the same, as *"animals make everything better"* (Hollie, int 1). Although she was unable to have a pet in her student accommodation, she exhibited agency to seek out emotional connections with animals as a relationship that was significant to her. This highlights how the animal wellbeing opportunities that universities increasingly offer for their students (Gallard, 2024) may provide a strong opportunity for estranged students to curate positive support for themselves outside of their connections with other people.

10.3   Conclusion

Contrary to the beliefs encoded in higher education policy, every estranged student in this study was supported beyond their institution.   Some chose to pursue self-reliance as a source of empowerment, where university support was just one resource they drew upon. Others found that the experience of seeking support from their university made them feel like a burden, turning to more compassionate sources instead.

Additionally, students did not feel that their universities could help them create a personal and safe place they had ownership of, conditions necessary to establish a 'home'. Instead, they drew on their relationships to create a supportive 'home base' where they could truly belong, surrounded by their 'chosen family' or others they cared about.

None of the estranged students were completely alone or isolated — as assumed by the deficit model — but rather built and maintained their own adaptive *"networks"* with others over time. These supportive relationships provided them with a source of resources and capitals while studying. While some described these relationships as familial, they were not a perfect replacement for the consistency, stability, and societal legitimacy of a normative family.

Higher education policy must consider how formally offered and informally built support mechanisms can co-exist in harmony, where institutional support can assist estranged students with the problems they struggle to solve alone. Primarily, this means universities supporting estranged students with economic and symbolic capital while facilitating students to build supportive relationships themselves, rather than trying to replace the social and emotional aspects of family directly.

CHAPTER 11

HOPES FOR LIFE AFTER UNIVERSITY

So far, this thesis has explored diverse insights into the university experiences of estranged students, including how they must look to the future to ensure their survival. While the topic of anticipations for their post-student futures was not explicitly included in the research questions, the students' future-orientated narratives in this study did not end at graduation — indeed, the participants' day-to-day narratives unexpectedly spoke at length about their hopes and concerns for post-university life. The longitudinal design of this study made it possible to adapt the final interview to further explore how estranged young people conceptualised their future beyond their fixed student timeline. Therefore, this chapter discusses this important theme of estranged students' hopes for their lives post-university, building on the small field of research regarding their transitions out of higher education (e.g. Rouncefield-Swales & Bland, 2019; Stevenson et al., 2020).

11.1 Hopes for a graduation ceremony

In the second interview, six of the seven remaining participants were entering their final of year of study[1]. I asked these students about their hopes for their upcoming graduation in the summer of 2022. Graduation ceremonies are considered a rite of passage for university students in the UK, providing the opportunity to formally recognise and celebrate their completed studies with family and friends. Thus, graduation is an event that is strongly tied to family discourse (Bourdieu, 1996) within higher education as the normative experience.

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[1] Rhys, Hollie and Nadia did not complete the final interview, and Asha still had three years remaining on her course.

While typically a positive celebratory event that students look forward to, two of the estranged participants' narratives raised dilemmas that were a direct result of their estrangement from family. For example, Finn had concerns about graduation more than a year before the event:

> *"Looking ahead to graduation at the end of next year...It troubles me as I don't know if any of my family are going to be there, I know my partner will...but what i really want is my dad and siblings"* (Finn, Feb21 diary)

Their desire to 'fit in' with the traditional graduation experience in their future became a worry in their present, manifesting as a form of 'anticipatory grief' (Agllias, 2017b) that reinforced the distinction that estranged students feel from their non-estranged peers (as explored in Chapter 8). In contrast, Beth described in her final interview the tensions she had with her mum, as these social family expectations conflicted with her own desires to attend graduation alone: *"[mum]'s like 'oh I can't wait til your graduation' like on the basis that she's coming and I'm just kind of like 'we didn't even have that discussion' and shutting it down"* (Beth, int 2). This demonstrates an ongoing estrangement 'practice' (Barnwell, 2024) for Beth, who needed to reject communicative advances and expectations from her mother, whose attendance was socially taken-for-granted. Indeed, while she was able to demonstrate agency and reject this advance, she anticipated a continued grappling with this decision in the future, as she theorised that her peers would reject her decision to not invite her mother: *"saying 'my mum's not coming to mine', they're kind of like 'what you mean why, like it's your mum' [...] it's kind of like really awkward to do it"* (Beth, int 2). Indeed, Beth's negotiation of the upcoming event of graduation in advance was a continuous act of resistance against compounding pressures of family discourse (Mizielińska, 2022).

However, in the wider context of the pandemic, graduation ceremonies had been cancelled and there was uncertainty over whether graduation would happen in the traditional way for the participants. Four of the six estranged students spoke about how graduation was an uncertain prospect due to lockdown but hoped that their

ceremony would take place in person as usual. As Kate reflected, *"I can't imagine the cohorts behind us who weren't able to like put it behind them and celebrate it, and yeah I feel really sorry for them so hopefully we can actually get one"* (Kate, int 2). From Kate's perspective, graduation represented a symbolic transition from 'student' to 'graduate' (Neale, 2019), allowing her to put student life 'behind' her and progressing into the next life stage, becoming an 'adult'. Indeed, for estranged students who spend their university experience continuously looking ahead to survive their studies (as explored in Chapter 8), graduation may represent a uniquely important 'finish line' that their future-focus orientates towards. Even outside of the unique circumstances of the pandemic, estranged students are often excluded from the mythos of these events, in the same way that Beth and Finn felt excluded from family-orientated celebrations in the earlier years of their study (see Chapter 8). These narratives highlight the important need for higher education practices to embrace a broader understanding of family support and stop linking university celebrations with the 'ideal' family.

Despite the upcoming barriers they anticipated at graduation, all six of the students who were approaching graduation in the coming year planned to attend and felt excitement for the event. Regardless of her mother's conflict, Beth wanted to go *"because I worked hard for it"* (Beth, int 2), and Priya described how she was excited to spend the day as other students do, with her aunt and grandmother, and to engage in graduation practices like *"the clothing things, the hat, and take the pictures"* (Priya, int 2). These positive and hopeful perspectives sit alongside those of concern towards their future and highlight how academic transitions can be multifaceted for estranged students.

11.2   Hopes for post-university life

Throughout the study, all of the participants shared insights into their hopes for post-university life, and the six who participated in the final interview were asked about their goals, hopes, and plans for the future. There were three core themes of

post-graduation futures in their narratives, which the remainder of this chapter will explore: career aspirations, concerns around continuing into postgraduate study, and personal future goals.

11.2.1   Career aspirations

The majority of the students who participated in this study had clear future goals and aspirations for their careers, which they spoke about passionately throughout the research, as summarised in Table 11.1 on the next page. Rather than situating themselves exclusively within their present student 'struggles' (Costa et al., 2020a, p. 119), these narratives highlight how estranged students feel empowered to set future goals and work towards them. As Marvell and Child (2023) argued, it is important to not ignore the young estranged people's futures through a deficit model.

While the students had clear aspirations for their future, many of them discussed the importance of having a *"Plan B"* and alternative plans in case their intended career and future study goals did not align. Beth anticipated needing to prepare *"a plan B, C, D, and E"* (Beth, int 2) if she did not get her scholarship for bar school but waited to mobilise these plans until she heard the result in early 2022. In contrast, some of the participants had already set their alternative plans in motion as a precautionary measure. Finn had reflected in their diaries about how estrangement impacted whether achieving their goals was realistic: *"As i don't have good contact with my parents it does make me feel inclined to not follow my dreams and instead achieve the more reasonable"* (Finn, Mar21 diary). Yet by the final interview, Finn had lined up a conversion course and an apprenticeship, which would allow them to defer their PhD study until a later date if needed, expressing relief that *"I have options"* (Finn, int 2). Even though Dani had no concerns about finding a teaching job once she graduated, she was preparing to apply for a Masters in Social Work as *"a backup just in case [...] I could do something else that was also working with kids that I could also make an impact"* (Dani, int 2). These narratives highlight the significance of *"backup"* options for estranged students who may be unable to 'return home' and be supported by their family 'safety net' when plans fall through

Table 11.1: The participants shared their clear aspirations for careers post-university

Student	Aspirations
Beth	Train to become a barrister
Rhys	General interest in working in business
Kate	Gain experience in hospitals before moving to community work in the medical field
Sophie	Further study in Sociology to become a researcher
Asha	Long-term medical training to become a GP
Dani	Working with children as a teacher or in social services
Finn	Studying for a PhD and teaching part-time to become an academic
Hollie	General interest in working in the sports industry
Nadia	Further study in Politics and pursuing a PhD

(Lewis et al., 2016). However, rather than grabbing any opportunity that secured their short-term survival, as would be assumed under a deficit model (Marvell & Child, 2023), the students focused on opportunities that made progress towards their long-term career aspirations. These flexible and realistic preparations to achieve both economic stability and personal may also be what drives them to remain in higher education, despite the barriers that they face during their studies.

In contrast, throughout the study Priya shared growing concerns that she did not know what she wanted to do post-graduation. She wrote in her diaries about how challenges in her present compounded her anxieties for the future:

> *"along with the stress of exams. I recently had an argument with a family member. Both of these factors have made me start thinking more seriously about my future in terms of carer but with the current pandemic situation i don't really know what to do"* (Priya, Jan21 diary)

Months later at the final interview, these fears had escalated: *"I have no idea whatsoever what I want to do and that's probably the most concerning thing that I have right about now"* (Priya, int 2). As explored in Chapter 9, her prioritisation of economic stability over pursuing a specific career path was deemed *"abnormal"* in higher education. Priya's narrative highlights how the intensity of present pressures as a student and uncertainty for their post-graduation futures can be challenging for estranged students to navigate. Empathetic support from universities that does not perpetuate stigmas or alienate estranged students is vital when navigating significant transitions without an unconditional 'safety net' from family (Swartz et al., 2011).

11.2.2   Concerns around continuing with postgraduate study

In order to reach their future career goals, most of the participants intended to continue their higher education studies to postgraduate level. Sophie, Finn, and Nadia wished to continue studying their subject to a postgraduate level and

eventually pursue a PhD, while Beth needed to continue her studies to become a qualified barrister. However, rather than viewing their educational prospects with hope, many of the students raised concerns around support.

For Beth and Finn, the financial challenges that dominated their undergraduate educational experiences continued to be a major concern for their future study. Statutory funding for postgraduate study differs substantially to undergraduate funding models in England, as students are only able to apply for a loan of up to £12,471 to cover both their tuition fees and living costs (Student Finance England, 2025). These funds are largely considered to be inadequate in enabling access to postgraduate study, particularly for non-traditional students (e.g. Wakeling & Mateos-Gonzalez, 2021), and leave many reliant on alternative, competitive means of funding such as scholarships. Indeed, Beth was waiting to hear back regarding a scholarship to 'bar school' during the final interview, but narrated a pressing concern that her reliance on a debt plan could lead to her losing the opportunity to achieve her dream career:

> *"if you've got ten students in a room and all of them are like really good and then you learn one of them's got a debt plan it just seems like an easy way to say 'okay you go home' [...] if I don't get this scholarship [...] I can't do the course, like that is my bottom line because I don't have any money to put towards it, I can't work and have a baby and deal with a disability and do the course, it just wouldn't work"* (Beth, int 2)

Her previous experiences of financial precarity that dominated her undergraduate studies threatened to destabilise her future prospects, and the intersecting circumstances of being a disabled single parent made her reliant on this funding to make her dreams achievable. Ongoing concerns about affording postgraduate study also arose in Finn's narrative, who wrote in their diary about their concerns with *"the feasibility of it all, it's going to be tight with money, especially if i can't work alongside"* (Finn, Mar21 diary). In their final interview Finn shared their intentions to teach part-time alongside their PhD or find a major loan to cover it, reflecting on how *"I can't lean on anybody whilst I do this, you know I haven't got anybody to fall*

back on so I have to be able to support myself and my partner" (Finn, int 2). These students' longitudinal sense of financial precarity in higher education necessitated their need to look ahead into their futures, echoing the concerns around a graduation 'cliff-edge' (Baker, 2024b), whereby the financial support packages from SFE or universities for estranged undergraduates abruptly end and are inadequately replaced.

Alongside financial concerns, some of the students also described barriers that arose from a lack of good pastoral support to continue their postgraduate studies. For example, Nadia wrote in her diaries about her aspirations to study a Masters and PhD at an elite university in England, but these were not encouraged by her core support in her boyfriend:

> *"After telling my boyfriend that I wanted to study this, he laughed at me and said it was the 'most clowned degree' ever' [...] I don't feel as if I have anyone to talk to about my future career plans"* (Nadia, Jan21 diary)

Similar issues arose for Beth regarding the absence of unconditional and encouraging familial support with post-university transitions. As discussed earlier, her reliance on competitive scholarships to fund her course stemmed in part from being a single parent with no family support to assist with her parenting responsibilities. This also impacted which schools she could attend, preventing her from having the full *"pick of the draw"* (Beth, int 2) that her non-estranged, non-single-parent peers would likely be able to choose between. These narratives highlight the importance of strong relational support to aid with the transition from undergraduate to postgraduate education for estranged students who may not be able to draw upon biological family for emotional support (Bland & Stevenson, 2018).

11.2.3   Hopes for personal stability

In their prospective narratives about their futures, the estranged students did not just reflect on the career and academic goals core to their identity but also focused on

their more fundamental desires for material and emotional stability. Priya and Asha spoke about a hope that their post-university lives would be 'stable' compared to their university experiences. Even with many years left of her degree and subsequent medical training to become a GP, she shared how she was excitedly anticipating starting her career, *"after that is a bit more settled [...] I can get like a final job and start to think about settling down"* (Asha, int 2). Moreover, although Priya did not have a specific career path in mind, she was highly motivated to find a career that provided *"enough money to live comfortably, that's just what I want"* (Priya, int 2). These students both faced continuous instability throughout their narratives: Asha struggled with frequent housing displacements and moving between campus and placement sites (see Figure 8.1 on page 192), while Priya faced continued financial instability from the challenges of accessing SFE support and funds during the summer (see Chapter 8). These challenging experiences during their studies likely led these students to look forward to the relative stability of their post-student lives.

Furthermore, many of the students shared their personal hopes for the future regarding a desire to continue building their support systems and create their own family and home, as they did during their studies. In their final interviews, Sophie, Kate, and Dani all shared a hope to move into a new home with their partners following graduation. As an example, Dani shared in her second interview the excitement she had for creating her own space:

> *"hopefully moving in [with] my boyfriend into our, into our own house, and I just love decorating so I can't wait for that and do our own decorating and painting the house, it's going to be brill"* (Dani, int 2)

There is a sense here that finishing university and moving into the next stage of life also enables them to create a home as adults, and begin to 'display' (Finch, 2007) their own more socially 'legitimate' family, rather than being discursively positioned as 'deviant' (Boddy, 2019) when distant from family as young students. For Finn, their familial hopes also centred around their desire to continue rebuilding their

relationships with biological family, writing in a diary entry that *"only time will tell if they will accept my later decision in life and get on board with me being me"* (Finn, Aug21 diary). Overall, these narratives highlight how estranged students' transitions out of university can be another step in their personal transition away from a challenging past in the family 'field' (Atkinson, 2014). Graduation was not just a threatening 'cliff-edge' of losing support (Baker, 2024b), but also an exciting opportunity to curate their own support into their futures.

11.3   Conclusion

While this study did not explicitly seek to understand how estranged students anticipated their post-graduation lives, their narratives demonstrated how past, present, and future felt intertwined. The need to consider their futures and prepare ahead for survival (as discussed in Chapter 8) stretched beyond the higher education field and into their personal lives. However unlike other studies that have viewed graduation as a transition from the safety and security of university to the perils of the 'real world' (Rouncefield-Swales & Bland, 2019; Stevenson et al., 2020), many of these students felt confident, hopeful, and excited for their lives beyond higher education.

Higher education and widening participation policy considers graduate outcomes purely based on whether students progress to further education or become employed professionals after their studies (Office for Students, 2023b). However, this is not the sole focus of estranged students, whose aspirations extend to settling in a stable and secure home surrounded by their own socially legitimate family.

CHAPTER 12

CONCLUSION

This thesis has discussed my research, a longitudinal study exploring ten estranged students' narratives about their experiences in UK higher education. It has investigated how these students navigated an environment underpinned by family ideology, where estrangement from family is seen as deviant. Qualitatively following their narratives through an academic year and its holidays revealed diverse novel insights on how they experienced family estrangement, their daily lives as students, and the support they drew upon. Throughout, it has considered what changes could be made to the sector to better support estranged students. This final chapter will bring together core findings to answer the three research questions, and provide recommendations for future research, practice, and policy.

12.1 Core findings

12.1.1 RQ1: How do estranged students experience family and estrangement during their higher education studies?

This study was novel in its exploration of how estranged students engage with the notions of family and estrangement during their studies. The participants of this research held multifaceted perceptions of these terms and experienced them in diverse ways.

Estrangement was an ongoing process, rather than a single formative event. The students spoke about 'turning points' throughout their studies: temporal moments that acted as a catalyst for change, taking attention away from their education as

they focused on actively 'practising' their estrangement. These 'practices' included managing their emotions during 'trigger dates' and enforcing boundaries with family members. Additionally, estrangement was not always experienced as a binary — four of the ten students described cyclical estrangement where they had inconsistent contact and emotional distance from family during their studies. These experiences are ignored in higher education policy, where formal definitions of estrangement only recognise a complete and permanent breakdown of communication between a student and both parents. Current policy strips estranged students of their agency, threatening to take away financial support should a student wish to reconcile with their parents.

The participants' experiences of family evolved over time. Rejecting the sanctity of biological relations core to family ideology, they re-defined family as something *"beyond blood"*. To these estranged students, family was a fluid structure that close companions could create by performing familial 'practices', such as being reliable, compassionate, and supporting each other. The narratives they shared reveal how they actively recreated and maintained a 'chosen family' of their own. Despite this, the students struggled to 'display' these chosen families in socially legitimate ways, leading to further stigmatisation.

Overall, being estranged consisted of more than just 'struggle'. Despite the dominant social conceptualisation that family estrangement is a problem to be fixed, many of the participants found their estrangement empowering. The liberation from their harmful family field enabled young people to embrace their personal identities without judgement. For these students, higher education provided a secure route to freedom.

12.1.2 RQ2: What are the significant experiences for estranged students across the academic year and holidays?

This research is novel in its focus on the events that estranged students themselves deemed significant enough to share. The longitudinal design of this study allowed

for narratives that captured the diverse range of estranged students' experiences, from the mundane to the milestones.

Estranged students looking ahead to their future studies, and beyond, formed a significant temporal theme throughout this thesis. These students without a family 'safety net' were always conscious of their future security and worked to guarantee it for themselves, saving up money months in advance to ensure their survival. The higher education sector fails to consider how, for estranged students, the year does not end when term-time does. As such, the participants were forced to plan ahead to bridge these gaps in support. Even further ahead, students actively planned their future lives beyond their studies. Central to these plans was a focus on how they would establish a safe and secure 'home' with a normative family they could 'display' proudly. These experiences resulted in estranged students viewing themselves as at a disadvantage from their non-estranged peers, who they saw as a homogenous group with a 'normal' student experience.

Despite existing literature into estranged students that glosses over their academic lives, when this study provided an opportunity to share what mattered to them, the participants spoke about typical student concerns: their challenging workload, opened up about imposter syndrome and expressed nerves about upcoming assessments. While these sound like 'normal' student narratives, their estrangement shaped these aspects in unique ways. For example, students shared how they felt unable to celebrate their academic achievements without family present, and their difficulties balancing academic and personal responsibilities. Overall, many felt joy when studying and thrived in an academic environment, countering the historical focus on their 'struggle'.

The design of this research enabled exploration into the hidden lives of estranged students, revealing the diversity between participants and within each participant over time. The students' day-to-day narratives discussed not only the major periods of 'struggle', but also the calm and mundane moments that constitute everyday life. These stories of everyday life *were* the significant experiences that the participants

chose to share. In this way, estranged students countered the deficit model and highlighted how the right support can help them feel a sense of belonging in higher education, thriving in a home they create for themselves.

12.1.3 RQ3: What support do estranged students engage with during their studies?

The exploratory narratives in this study identified how support spanned beyond higher education institutions. Participants accessed formal and informal support in an agentic way to manage the challenges stemming from their estrangement.

The students engaged with a range of formal support from their university, Student Finance, and other student-facing organisations. However, they found flaws in this support that exacerbated existing issues or introduced new problems. In particular, university support that was designed for the general student population failed to acknowledge their unique circumstances and perpetuated the stigma of estrangement. Despite these risks, estranged students still engaged with support due to the practical benefits it offered. Particularly beneficial were adequate financial support during major hurdles, and pastoral support that offered help with the small unexpected challenges in their student experience.

A core novel contribution of this study was the significance of informal systems of support, actively cultivated by the participants to be drawn from later. The one-size-fits-all approach to estrangement has assumed that estranged students must have a 'lack' of family capital, but these participants accessed support from other members of their biological family, in addition to their friends and romantic partners. These 'families of choice' were not a perfect reconstruction of the idealised family and did not always replace the 'safety net' that they felt their non-estranged peers had consistent access to. However, these relational support systems were essential in creating a sense of 'home' at university, while providing a sense of self-reliance beyond the precarious support offered by their institutions.

12.2   Contributions of this thesis

This study is the first to examine estranged students' experiences in higher education through a longitudinal narrative design, adding novel perspectives and contributions to the literature. The unique, individual stories from each student about their day-to-day lives in higher education demonstrated nuanced lived experiences in the present, and a temporal fluidity in moving beyond their past to prepare for their futures. In particular, the temporal frame of this study did not solely focus on a specific transition or challenging time during the academic calendar, offering insights into the day-to-day 'mundane' experiences of everyday life as an estranged student.

Furthermore, this thesis contributes by considering how taking an open and compassionate approach towards listening to estranged students' voices, and enabling them to discuss what matters to them, can break down deficit models that homogenise their student experiences. This study provides empirical evidence that estranged students do not exclusively experience 'struggle', but can find empowerment, joy, and a sense of 'home' in higher education that they could not cultivate in their biological family 'field'. Rather than having a 'lack' of capital and being wholly reliant on their institution for support, the participants built supportive relationships that in many ways constituted a 'chosen family' and provided material and social resources to aid with their studies.

Moreover, this study is situated within the unique context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This research contributes a qualitative longitudinal lens on how estranged students navigated lockdown to complement the existing cross-sectional survey research that examined how estranged students were further disadvantaged during this time. For example, unanticipated costs exacerbated existing strains on their limited economic capital, and the closure of campus impacted their ability to cultivate supportive relationships with others at their university that were significant in creating 'home'. However, for these estranged students, the pandemic was not a major disruption that threatened their overall sense of stability — estranged students faced the same

issues as their non-estranged peers of losing out on the core 'student experience' such as in-person teaching and graduation ceremonies.

Finally, a core contribution of this thesis was its explicit consideration of how estranged students navigate the wider social discourses about 'family'. Rather than situating estranged students solely within widening participation contexts, this study considered how broader functionalist perspectives perpetuate 'family ideology' as the basis of higher education policy. This thesis has explored how it is these policies that make family estrangement a disadvantaged characteristic, and that estrangement is not inherently a 'problem'. Additionally, applying the theoretical lenses of family 'practices', 'display', and 'families of choice' to estranged students' narratives of their student experiences enabled unique exploration of the mismatch between the participants' fluid constructions of family, and the narrow definitions and perspectives imposed by the systems around them.

12.3 Limitations and recommendations for future research

The temporal frame of this QL study faced some limitations. As discussed in Chapter 6, I was unable to carry out the initially planned 12-month duration due to ill health, starting data collection in December 2020, shortly after the start of the academic year. Despite these limitations, this study brought unique temporal insights into how estranged students' experiences are fluid and diverse across the academic year and the holidays. Thus, future exploratory research with estranged students should continue to adopt this longitudinal approach where possible to further understanding of student experiences over time. A longer temporal frame that encompasses a full calendar year, or the entire student lifecycle and beyond, would bring additional insights.

The small sample of this study means that its findings have limited transferability to the wider population of estranged students studying in England. Indeed, the unique

socioeconomic circumstances of the pandemic situate the students' narratives in an atypical day-to-day context that may further limit the applicability of these findings. However, an intention of this exploratory research was seeking previously unknown 'truths' rather than the single objective 'truth', exploring the day-to-day lives of estranged students through the construction of personal narratives over time. Indeed, this research found new themes that had not been discussed in prior literature, including how the estranged students' main focus was on their academic endeavours, and their persistent need to plan far into the future. Future research should continue to seek out, and truly listen to, the diverse stories of estranged students and provide evidence that aids in breaking down the homogenous, deficit approaches applied to estranged students in research, policy, and practice.

Quantitative longitudinal insights will help to enhance these findings, providing more precise data on how trends manifest over time for estranged students. Analysis of large quantitative datasets from the NSS and HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey should be conducted as they publish their data on estranged students' experiences. These large datasets have the ability to act more like a census of estranged students, producing reliable data that minimises sampling bias. However, it is essential to consider how these datasets define estrangement, and the impact of estranged students being misrecognised.

In Chapter 4, I critically interrogated the lack of intersectional thinking in widening participation policy and how this minimises the complex experiences of estranged students who span multiple categories of disadvantage. Even within the small sample of this study, there were multiple examples of how the disadvantages caused by estrangement in higher education were compounded by other characteristics — the participants shared moments where they experienced further challenges as a result of their estrangement intersecting with care experience, disability, LGBTQ+ identity, race, age, social class, parental responsibilities, and geographical distance from campus. However, this study could not consider these intersections in depth as I did not explicitly ask the participants about their intersecting marginalisations. Instead, discussion was reliant on the times that

students mentioned or merely implied these characteristics in their narratives, making it difficult to analyse this intersectionality without making assumptions. These examples of intersectionality identify areas for further research to explore specifically, investigating how the intersection between estrangement and other characteristics should demand more flexibility in student status, rather than pigeonholing students into a single category of disadvantage.

Finally, I encourage future researchers who wish to explore the experiences of estranged young people to critically engage with the taken-for-granted social concepts of family and estrangement. We all have our own stories of what our families look like and the extent to which they are 'normal', but we must not assume that these are shared with those we meet in our research. Drawing on the prompts shared by Zufferey and Horsell (2022) when encouraging researchers to reflect on 'home', I encourage researchers to engage in reflexivity on their own perception of 'family':

- What are your personal experiences of family?

- Have you experienced any form of 'estrangement'?

- What does family mean to you?

- Who counts as your family?

- Why are these reflections important?

In this way, future research can continue to ethically uplift estranged students' own voices and diverse experiences, ultimately breaking down the deficit models in research, policy, and practice.

12.4   Recommendations for policy and practice

On an institutional level, universities need to ensure their limited resources are used effectively to provide adequate and compassionate support for estranged

students. Institutions should prioritise their resources towards support that estranged students cannot easily recreate through informal and relational means, with particular emphasis on consistent economic support (such as bursaries) and symbolic support (such as guarantor schemes and facilitating student meetups). This support is often provided by centralised university departments, so those who create and/or deliver these mechanisms must be mindful of the unique circumstances of estranged students and refrain from perpetuating a deficit model.

A dedicated member of staff who is passionate and considerate of estranged students' unique position in higher education is a positive starting point to improve institutional consideration of estranged students. They should take the time to build rapport with each individual estranged student to truly hear their personal story and support needs, understanding how they can help that student succeed in higher education and in the transition to life beyond.

Universities should also take the time to thoroughly identify the estranged students at their institution, and facilitate connecting estranged students with one another, enabling them to build their own supportive and understanding relationships. I acknowledge that the task of identifying estranged students on an institutional level is a complex matter, particularly as it requires a definition of 'estranged'. An important starting point is to move away from the arbitrary limitations imposed by SFE around students' age, the length of time they have been estranged, and whether they see an opportunity for reconciliation. Additionally, universities must acknowledge the intersectionality of estranged students, ensuring that they can benefit from multiple widening participation programmes simultaneously.

When developing a sense of what works for their institution, universities should also continue to share best practices and collaborate with others in the absence of Stand Alone conferences. Being involved in initiatives organised by charities or professional organisations such as NNECL, Unite Foundation, or the NEON Estranged Student Working Group will facilitate the continued development of beneficial institutional support. Estranged students themselves should be

welcomed into these spaces to ensure that their perspectives are at the forefront of this work.

This study also identified limitations with SFE policies that must be addressed. SFE should follow the Scottish model by providing the option for estranged students to have their maintenance loan paid throughout the calendar year, with an additional bursary to alleviate financial pressure during the holidays. Rather than requiring students to 'prove' their lack of family, estranged student status should be determined on a case-by-case basis, working with student-facing staff directly rather than indirectly via the student. Finally, the strict definition of 'irreconcilable' physical estrangement should be reconsidered to support 'emotionally estranged' students who have strained, unsupportive, and inconsistent relationships with their parents. A national policy of estrangement self-identification will spur positive changes towards more inclusive and validating definitions throughout the higher education sector.

Finally, wider social policy should be more accepting of the idea that not all young people have access to a supportive family 'safety net' in times of crisis. For example, students should be able to access benefits, and minimum wages should not be differentiated by age.

12.5 Closing remarks

Overall, this thesis has argued that estrangement itself is not a social problem that needs to be 'fixed'. Rather, it can be a source of empowerment for many individuals with experiences of trauma. The barriers faced by estranged students inside social institutions such as higher education stem from the fact that these institutions continue to privilege biological families over other supportive relationships, due to the prevalence of family ideology. If society were to truly legitimise 'families of choice' then the barriers faced by estranged young people would cease to exist, allowing them to thrive with a family they create for themselves.

Until then, more work must be done to support estranged students and enable them to tackle challenges they face during their studies. Estranged students must not be cast aside by widening participation policy now that the driving force of Stand Alone is no longer present. Those working with estranged students must talk to them directly and listen to their stories, rather than making harmful assumptions. Therefore, this thesis will close by sharing recommendations from the estranged student participants themselves.

Construction of peer support networks facilitated by university

> *"a better support network [...] sometimes we just want a chat , not a therapy session"* (Beth)

> *"more opportunities for these students to make friends and build a support group"* (Priya)

> *"You feel like your alone within this situation. So maybe a little support around feeling less alone. Maybe a little group would help?"* (Dani)

> *"more stuff for people who aren't necessarily on campus [...] in some ways I guess it was better when in the pandemic because it was a lot of stuff was online [...] now they've gone back to in person which is a lot nicer if you can attend, but if you can't then you're sort of cut off from it"* (Asha)

Practical support with barriers faced during studies

> *"when you're a student you're looked at like an adult, but you're still getting there [...] you're not really an adult yet. So I think a lot more help is needed in these sort of areas"* (Nadia)

> *"More financial support to be accessed"* (Beth)

> *"the university should act as parents in certain regards [...] many people who have family to rely on can probably drive up to the university and help them with their belongings whereas students like myself have to pay for things to be moved around or stored in facilities. It would be nice if the university offered subsidised storage or free storage facilities for estranged students"* (Priya)

Comprehensive support provision

> *"I am so thankful to them for the help they have given me- I really don't think I would have been able to study at a university that didn't have such a caring team"* (Kate)

PART III

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PART IV

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT POSTER

Are you an undergraduate student studying without contact with/support from your family?

My name is A███ Waterman, and I am inviting you to participate in this research project as part of my PhD. It is interested in exploring the academic and personal experiences of students who are 'estranged' from their family.

This is a longitudinal study which takes place over 4 waves. The first wave begins in late 2020, and the final wave ends in September 2021. In each wave, you will be asked to write diary entries and take part in an interview with the researcher about your university experiences. All activities will be online.

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are study any course at any university in England, and are not in your first or final year of your studies.

Your voice and experiences are valued. If you choose to share them, you will help to make positive change for current and future university students. As a thank you, you will receive a £20 voucher at the end of each wave you take part in.

FOR MORE INFORMATION OR TO REGISTER YOUR INTEREST IN PARTICIPATING IN THIS STUDY

✉ a███.waterman@durham.ac.uk

NINE DTP   Durham University

Note: Instances of my previous name have been redacted from the appendices.

APPENDIX B

RECRUITMENT WEBSITE

Are you an undergraduate student studying without support from your family?

Hi! I'm A█, and I am currently looking for people like you to participate in my PhD research project. It's exploring the academic and personal experiences of **students who are 'estranged', meaning they have a strained relationship with their family** and may not have any contact with them.

Specifically, I'm looking for **people studying at universities in England on any undergraduate course**. You need to have been at uni for at least a year already and not be graduating this year.

This is a year-long study made up of 4 waves. The first wave begins in late 2020, and the final wave ends in September 2021. In each wave, you'll write diary entries and take part in an interview with me about your university experiences. Everything will be online.

By choosing to share your experiences, you'll make a positive change for current and future university students. As a thank you, you'll receive a **£20 voucher at the end of each wave** you participate in.

[Take Part]

About Me

My name is A█ Waterman. I'm a 2nd year PhD student at Durham University, based in the School of Education. I'm interested in improving student experiences in higher education, particularly for students who are studying without family support.

This topic is personal to me because I am an estranged student myself: I became estranged from my family in my first term of university. During my undergraduate, masters, and PhD so far, my lack of a traditional family support network has caused various challenges.

In my third year of university, I began working to raise awareness of family estrangement and improve estranged students' experiences. I founded Durham Estranged Students, a network for care-experienced and estranged students, and worked with staff to improve university policy and support. Nationally, I've campaigned with the estrangement charity Stand Alone, speaking on the BBC and at various conferences.

As an Education student, it inevitably became a research interest too! For my undergraduate dissertation, I interviewed estranged students about their university experiences so far. In contrast, my PhD explores the full estranged student experience for as it happens. It aims to make the UK's higher education system better for students like us.

About the Study

Purpose

The aim of this study is to explore undergraduate estranged students' academic and personal experiences of higher education. The study will take place from November 2020 until September 2021, and the study is interested in capturing how estranged

students experience higher education across an academic year and its vacations. It aims to gather a deeper understanding of estranged students' experiences across the year to inform university and national policy to support students without family support.

Who is eligible?

To be eligible to participate in this study, you must:

- Be an undergraduate student studying any course at an English university
- Have been at university for at least a year already and not have graduated by September 2021
- Self-idenfify as having little/no support from your family (estranged)

What will happen?

If you agree to take part in the study, you will be invited to participate in different online activities from the point of recruitment until September 2021.

You will first be asked to take part in an online briefing interview (either via Zoom, Skype, or Microsoft Teams). In this interview, you will be asked some questions about yourself, your family relationships, and to reflect on your university experiences so far. The interview also acts as an opportunity for you to ask questions, and to introduce you to the diary platform that will be used throughout the study. This interview will last around 1 hour.

The study will then take place across four waves which you will be invited to participate in. These waves take place during the 2020/21 academic year and its vacation periods:

- Wave 1: November 2020 – January 2021
- Wave 2: February 2021 – April 2021
- Wave 3: May 2021 – June 2021
- Wave 4: July 2021 – September 2021

In each wave, you will be asked to write short diary entries about your recent university experiences. You can write as many entries as you like, but at least one per month. These will be submitted via an online diary platform, which is introduced in the briefing interview. While there will be some guiding questions, you are able to write about any aspect of your university experience that you feel comfortable sharing.

At the end of each wave, you will be asked to participate in an online interview on whatever platform you feel comfortable using. In these interviews, we will discuss your diary entries written in this wave and ask further questions about your university experiences. These interviews will last around 1 hour. You can decline any questions that you don't want to answer, or end the interview early, without giving a reason.

Overall, full participation in the study would involve 5 interviews and at least 9 diary entries across a 10-month timeline. You will receive a thank-you payment of a £20 voucher for each wave you participate in. This will be paid to you after the interview has taken place.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation is voluntary, and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. You are also able to withdraw temporarily from the study at any point, and re-return later in the study if you wish. Your rights in relation to withdrawing any data that is identifiable to you are explained in the Privacy Notice.

Are there any potential risks involved?

It is possible that talking about and reflecting on your university experiences may involve encountering difficult topics and experiencing negative emotions and feelings. These may include, but are not exclusive to, your financial situation, unwanted family contact, accommodation issues and homelessness, mental health concerns, and stigmatisation within your university.

If you experience distress during any of the research activities, you are free to stop and not complete it, without negative consequence. You are able to complete your diary entries and interviews in a space and time that you are comfortable with, and you are able to decline any questions without giving reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study, either temporarily or fully, without negative consequence.

After each interview, and at any time on request, you will be signposted to resources for support avenues locally and nationally. Your voice and experiences are valued. Your participation in this study provides greater understanding of estranged students' experiences and helps to make positive change in universities for current and future estranged students.

Will my data be kept confidential?

All information obtained during the study will be kept confidential. If the data is published it will be entirely pseudonymous (using fake names) and will not be identifiable as yours. Full details are included in the Privacy Notice.

What will happen to the results of the project?

The researcher expects to publish findings in academic journal articles and conference presentations. Any published work will be shared with you, and you will be kept informed about any emerging outputs. No personal data will be shared, however anonymised (i.e. not identifiable data) may be used in publications, reports, presentations, web pages, and other research outputs.

Durham University is committed to sharing the results of its world-class research for public benefit. As part of this commitment the University has established an online repository for all Durham University Higher Degree theses which provides access to the full text of freely available theses. The study in which you are invited to participate will be written up as a thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives, to facilitate its use in future research. The thesis will be published open access.

All research data and records needed to validate the research findings will be stored for 10 years after the end of the project.

Affiliation

This project is affiliated with Durham University, NINE DTP, and Stand Alone.

Contact

If you have any questions, or interest in taking part, you can email me at: a███.waterman@durham.ac.uk. Alternatively, click the button below.

You can also contact my supervisor, Dr Rille Raaper by email at: rille.raaper@durham.ac.uk.

Take Part / Contact

APPENDIX C

EMAIL TO UNIVERSITIES TEMPLATE

Dear **NAME**,

My name is A███ Waterman: I'm a PhD student at Durham University in the School of Education. I found your email online as a contact for estranged students at **YOUR UNIVERSITY**.

For my thesis, I am exploring the experiences of estranged students at universities in England. I am emailing you today to ask whether you would be able to distribute the attached poster and website link which advertises my research to any undergraduate estranged students you work with at **YOUR UNIVERSITY**.

As the poster says, the purpose of this research is to explore the academic and personal experiences of students who are studying without contact with or support from their family. This is a year-long study made up of 4 waves: the first wave begins in late 2020, and the final wave ends in September 2021. In each wave, participants will be asked to write diary entries and take part in an interview about their university experiences.

To participate, students need to have been at university for at least a year already, and not be graduating this year. To thank students for sharing their experiences and contributing to making a positive change for current and future estranged students, they'll receive a £20 voucher at the end of each wave they participate in.

This study is affiliated with Durham University, NINEDTP, and UK charity Stand Alone. More information about the study and the contact form can be found at https://a███waterman.com/study. Students can also email me with any questions at a█████.waterman@durham.ac.uk.

I would be incredibly grateful if you could forward the poster and website link on to any estranged students that you work with. This would especially be great during Estranged Students Solidarity Week this week! I am also able to answer any questions you have about my research, so please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards,

A███ Waterman

APPENDIX D

DIARY PROMPTS

D.1 January

> **Please write about your recent experiences as an undergraduate student studying without family support.**
> You may wish to write about different events or situations that have happened since your last communication with the researcher. You may wish to write about your thoughts, feelings, and reactions to that event at the time, and now as you write the entry. These may be things in term-time and in the holiday period this month. These experiences may be academic, personal, social, or emotional, etc. Aim to write at least 250 words, but you can write as much or as little as you wish.

D.2 February

> **Please write about your recent experiences as an undergraduate student studying without family support.**
> You may wish to write about different events or situations that have happened since your previous diary entries. You may wish to write about your thoughts, feelings, and reactions to that event at the time, and now as you write the entry. These experiences may be academic, personal, social, or emotional, etc. You may also choose to write about your experiences during the current national lockdown. Aim to write at least 250 words, but you can write as much or as little as you wish.

D.3 March

> **Please write about your recent experiences as an undergraduate student studying without family support.**
> You may wish to write about different events or situations that have happened since your previous diary entries. You may wish to write about your thoughts, feelings, and reactions to that event at the time, and now as you write the entry. These experiences may be academic, personal, social, or emotional, etc. Aim to write at least 250 words, but you can write as much or as little as you wish.

D.4 April

> **Please write about your recent experiences as an undergraduate student studying without family support.**
> You may wish to write about different events or situations that have happened since your previous diary entries. You may wish to write about your thoughts, feelings, and reactions to that event at the time, and now as you write the entry. You may wish to talk about your plans or experiences during the current/upcoming vacation period (if applicable). These experiences may be academic, personal,social, or emotional, etc. Aim to write at least 250 words, but you can write as much or as little as you wish.

D.5 May

> **Please write about your recent experiences as an undergraduate student studying without family support.**
> You may wish to write about different events or situations that have happened since your previous diary entries. You may wish to write about your thoughts, feelings, and reactions to that event at the time, and now as you write the entry. You may wish to talk about your preparation for and experiences of any exam or assessment periods you have (if applicable). These experiences may be academic, personal, social, or emotional, etc. Aim to write at least 250 words, but you can write as much or as little as you wish.

D.6   June

> **Please write about your recent experiences as an undergraduate student studying without family support.**
> You may wish to write about different events or situations that have happened since your previous diary entries. You may wish to write about your thoughts, feelings, and reactions to that event at the time, and now as you write the entry. You may wish to talk about your preparation for and experiences of any exam or assessment periods you have (if applicable), or experiences after completion of these assessments. These experiences may be academic, personal, social, or emotional, etc. Aim to write at least 250 words, but you can write as much or as little as you wish.

D.7   August

> **Please write about your recent experiences as an undergraduate student studying without family support.**
> You may wish to write about different events or situations that have happened since your previous diary entries. You may wish to write about your thoughts, feelings, and reactions to that event at the time, and now as you write the entry. You may wish to talk about what has happened or your plans for this summer vacation period (if applicable). These experiences may be academic, personal, social, or emotional, etc. Aim to write at least 250 words, but you can write as much or as little as you wish.

D.8   Final

> **This final diary is a bit different. Instead of writing about your recent experiences, you will be asked some specific, reflective questions.**
> These are topics that have come up in this research project that I'd be interested to hear your thoughts and perspectives on. You can write as much or as little as you wish, but you should aim to write a short paragraph. You may wish to write about your thoughts, feelings, experiences and reactions that arise from the prompt. If you don't know what to write, that's absolutely fine - we can discuss these in the interview instead, or you can choose to not answer.

*What does the term **family** mean to you?*

*What does the term **home** mean to you?*

If you had the opportunity to go back, what is one thing you'd say to yourself on your first day of university?

What is one thing that you wish your university would do to help students without family support in the future?

APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW 1 TEMPLATE

Briefing Interview

Hello, is this X?

Hi X, this is A█████ Waterman, how are you?

Is this a good time to talk?

[if phone] Great. Before we start, are you okay with this chat being recorded?

Great. I'm going to just tell you a bit about myself, the study, and what we'll be doing today. Is that okay?

Introduction to me

I'm a second-year PhD student in Education at Durham University. I'm interested in improving student experiences in higher education, particularly for students who don't have family support.

This is a topic personal to me, as I am an estranged student: I became estranged from my family in my first term of university, and have had no contact with them for over 5 years, which created many challenges in my own studies.

Alongside researching estranged students' experiences, I campaign to raise awareness of family estrangement and estranged students' experiences nationally, including working with estrangement charity Stand Alone.

Introduction to study

For my thesis, I'm exploring the experiences of students who, like myself, do not have contact with or support from their family while studying.

As the participant information sheet says, the aim of this study is to explore the academic and personal experiences of university for students who are 'estranged'.

This is a year-long study, which begins now and continues until September 2021, in order to capture estranged students' lives across the academic year and the holidays.

This is a collaborative project with charity Stand Alone, and is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council through the NINEDTP.

What we're doing today

Today is the briefing interview. We'll start by having a chat about you and your university experiences so far, then talk about the rest of the study and answer any questions you have at this point. It should last around an hour.

Ethics

Everything you say today, and in all of our communications, will be kept confidential, and will not be identifiable as yours.

I know that talking about experiences can be difficult, so when asked a question, you can say as much as you want in response, and you can refrain from answering without giving reason.

We can stop this interview at any point, and you can withdraw from the study without negative consequence at any time.

Before we start the first part of the interview, do you have any **questions**?

[Ask them to fill in the consent form if needed]

[if online] Are you okay with this part of the call being recorded?

Part 1: Contextual questions

- Pronouns?
- How old are you?
- What university do you study at? Why did you choose to study there?
- What course are you studying? Why did you choose to study that course?
- When did you start university? What year are you in?
- Can you briefly tell me about your family situation?
    o You don't need to go into detail on the reasons why. I'd just like to ask who are you in contact with, and how long has that been the case for?

Part 2: Retrospective questions

I'd like to start with a very open question. **Can you tell me a bit about your university experience so far?** Have there been any key events, challenges, or positives that you've experienced since you started your studies?

- Can you tell me about your *transition* into university?
    o Moving to new location
    o Settling into new accommodation
    o Induction and settling into university life/culture

- Can you tell me about how you're finding your *academic* studies?
    o Amount and intensity of classes and outside-class work/placements
    o Independent learning and studying
    o Assessment: exams, assignments, etc.
    o Interactions with other students and staff on course

- - Enjoying it generally? Doing well?
  - Change to online

- Can you tell me about how you're finding your *social* life?
  - Involvement in student societies/volunteering
  - Living with others
  - Change to online

- Can you tell me about your *financial* situation during your studies?
  - Applications for student finance
  - Loans/grants/bursaries and support from university/elsewhere
  - Working part time (and implications of that on studies)

- Can you tell me about your *housing* situation during your studies?
  - Choosing the accommodation: how close to the campus, price, etc.
  - Process of accessing that accommodation
  - Stability of that accommodation, concerns of homelessness

- Can you tell me a bit about your *mental health and wellbeing* during your studies?
  - Mental health conditions
  - Day-to-day wellbeing

- Can you tell me about your experiences during the *holidays*?
  - How often are your university's vacations
  - Christmas/Easter/Summer
  - Stay on campus or go elsewhere? What do you get up to?
  - How do you find it?

- What about when the current *pandemic* and restrictions came in?
  - Did this bring any key challenges?
  - Did it bring any positives?
  - Shift of university life to online
  - Furlough schemes and job insecurity
  - Health concerns and social distancing

Where have you gone to access *support*?

- Who are the key individuals or groups who have supported you?

    o University? Peers? Other family members? Organisations?
- Have you accessed support through your university?
    o What did you access? How was it?
    o Did you try to access something and fail?
    o Not accessed, why not?

That is the end of the questions I had prepared. **Is there anything else you would like to add,** about anything we've talked about so far and anything you think we've missed?

Thank you so much for sharing about your experiences of university so far. I'll now turn off the recording.

Would you like to take a pause to get a drink or anything, or shall we continue to the next part of the interview?

Part 3: Remainder of the study

I'm now going to give you some information about what the rest of this project will involve. Most of this information is in the participant information sheet or privacy notice, which you can read at any time.

You can stop me at any time to ask questions or to elaborate on a point, or you can ask questions at the end. Is that okay?

Great. So, this study takes place across 4 waves. These are across the rest of this academic year and the holidays. You can see the waves outlined in the participant information sheet towards the top of page 2. But for reference, Wave 1 is from now until January, Wave 2 is from February to April, Wave 3 is from May to June, and Wave 4 is from July to September.

In each wave, you will be asked to write short diary entries about your recent university experiences, and have an interview with me about those entries and other experiences. We'll start by going over how the diaries will work.

[if screen sharing]

Am I okay to just briefly share my screen to show you?

Each month, you will receive an email with a link to a Google Doc. It will look a bit like this: at the top, it'll have the month and your participant ID, and a prompt in a box. These prompts will vary from month to month, but will be presented in the same way each time.

In the space below, you can write your entries in whatever format you like. There may be some guiding questions each month, but you are able to write about any aspects of your university experience that you feel comfortable sharing.

You should aim to write at least one entry per month. They don't need to be incredibly long, detailed, well-written accounts: you aren't going to be tested on your spelling or grammar or anything! The diaries are just a way that you can share your experiences between our interviews, so write them in whatever format and flow that works for you. You can write as many entries as you like, either using the one document or making a new one.

I'll give you a 'deadline' of the last point that you can edit your month's document before I begin to analyse them ready for our interview. After that deadline, I will send you a new link and you will be able to write in the next months' document.

You don't need to be signed into your Google account to write your entries: you just click the link and you'll be able to edit it. This means it won't show up in your personal Google Drive, and will be more discrete to anyone who may see your account.

The only reason you'd need to sign into your account is if you wanted to add pictures, videos, or other submissions to your personal folder, which I can send you the link to on request. Otherwise, you can just email them to me and I'll add them in.

You should write your diary entries in a time and space that you're comfortable with. If you're finding a specific question or writing difficult, you can come back to it at a different time. Remember that you are also free to not submit your entries for a month, a wave, or the remainder of the study, without negative consequence.

[if not screen sharing]

Each month, you will receive an email with a link to a Google Doc. It will have the month and your participant ID in the header, and at the top of the page will be a prompt in a box. These prompts will vary from month to month, but will be presented in the same way each time.

In the space below that box, you can write your entries in whatever format you like. There may be some guiding questions each month, but you are able to write about any aspects of your university experience that you feel comfortable sharing.

You should aim to write at least one entry per month. They don't need to be incredibly long, detailed, well-written accounts: you aren't going to be tested on your spelling or grammar or anything! The diaries are just a way that you can share your experiences between our interviews, so write them in whatever format and flow that works for you. You can write as many entries as you like, either using the one document or making a new one.

I'll give you a 'deadline' of the last point that you can edit your month's document before I begin to analyse them ready for our interview. After that deadline, I will send you a new link and you will be able to write in the next months' document.

You don't need to be signed into your Google account to write your entries: you just click the link and you'll be able to edit it. This means it won't show up in your personal Google Drive, and will be more discrete to anyone who may see your account.

The only reason you'd need to sign into your account is if you wanted to add pictures, videos, or other submissions to your personal folder, which I can send you the link to on request. Otherwise, you can just email them to me and I'll add them in.

You should write your diary entries in a time and space that you're comfortable with. If you're finding a specific question or writing difficult, you can come back to it at a different time. Remember that you are also free to not submit your entries for a month, a wave, or the remainder of the study, without negative consequence.

[all]

That's all the information on the diaries. Do you have any **questions** so far?

The study also involves more interviews together, which will happen at the end of each study wave. Our next one will be towards the end of January or beginning of February, at the end of Wave 1. In these interviews, we'll chat a bit more about the things you wrote in your diary entries, and other aspects of your recent university experiences. They should only last about an hour.

After you've participated in your end-of-wave interview, you will receive a £20 voucher by email. I'm still waiting for more details from my university about which vouchers they will be, but it is likely to be an Amazon voucher. Would you have an **alternative preference for the vouchers, if that were possible**?

Again, all of your information throughout the study will be kept confidential. Any data that is published in my thesis or other study outputs will not use your name, but a pseudonym.

Would you like to pick your pseudonym? You can always tell me what you want it to be later, or I can choose one.

Do you have any more **questions** at all about the study?

Fantastic. Just to check, are you happy with the **email contact** we are currently using? Or would you rather use a different one?

Thank you so much for your time and for sharing your experiences with me today. I'll be in touch soon to send you the first diary entry. As always, if you have any questions, concerns, further comments or anything, please don't hesitate to contact me via email.

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW 2 TEMPLATE

Purpose: wrapping up the study, asking for further questions around the diaries (filling in gaps, gaining clarity), and looking forward and backward

Different for each student – working around what they've discussed, what feels significant to them, working out the gaps in the narratives and seeing what was there

Diary as more generic – tapping into perceptions of different aspects, asking the same questions to compare their answers like in the briefing interview

- Support networks: have they changed over the year? What is significant to you now versus a year ago?
- Sense of belonging: Do you feel like a student? A member of your course? A member of your university?
- What are your plans and hopes for the future? Have they changed?
- Compared to your first year, or years previously at school etc, do you feel like the year has gone by quickly/slowly? Why?

Other themes that are important:

- Finances: how things feel looking forward?
- Accommodation: changes, choices looking forward
- Mental health, changes, looking forward
- Academics: reflecting on results, looking forward into final year and feelings about it
- Summer vacation – looking forward, post-Covid university

Custom Questions throughout

Intro

[Phone: Before we start, are you okay with this call being recorded?]

Introduction

Thank you for participating in the study so far and contributing your voice and experiences to this project.

Thank you for bearing with the changes and adjustments over the past few months to the project.

The aim of this study is to explore the academic and personal experiences of estranged students in universities across the year.

Today we have our final interview. We'll be chatting about some aspects of your university experience so far, and looking forward to the future. It should take about an hour.

Ethics

As with all of our communications so far, everything you say today will be kept confidential, and will not be identifiable as yours.

When asked a question, you can say as much as you want in response, and you can choose to not answer a question without needing a reason.

We can also stop this interview at any point, and you can choose to withdraw from the study fully without negative consequence.

Do you have any questions?

Are you okay with this part of the call being recorded?

Questions

Double checking demographic info, if any of it has changed

- Name
- Pronouns
- Age
- Uni & Course
- Which year in & how many left

How have things been since your last diary entry in XYZ?

Looking back, were there any key events, challenges, or positives of the 2020/2021 academic year?

Looking back: the diaries

- Things they've mentioned and asking about them
- Filling in gaps of any missing entries, any follow up questions
- Reflection on the year from now – how do you feel last year was overall compared to your first year of uni?

Academics

- How did last year go? Your grade?
- What year moving into, when does your term start?
- Back into class? Blended learning? Online?
- How many classes?
- How is assessment: exams, assignments, etc.
- Excited?

Finances/jobs

- Student finance continuing?
- Any extra loans/grants/bursaries?
- Continuing with job/wanting one?
- Looking forward, feeling secure?

Mental health

- How has it been day-to-day? Related to previous entries
- Ways that you look after your mental health/self care on a bad day?

Social life

- Has this changed/do you anticipate it to change this year with changes?
- Involvement in societies/volunteering?
- Support networks

Accommodation

- Moved at all? Why did you move there?
- Housemates changed?
- Feeling secure in the future?

Pandemic

- Do things feel like they're changing back to 'normal'?

Vacation periods

- Summer vacation

Transition into the new academic year

- New academic content
- Changes, ramping up or continuing
- Looking forward to it? Any worries/concerns?
- Dissertations/final exams for those in final year

Support from uni/LA/organisations

- Do you feel able to ask for help?
- What type of help would you want/need?

Sense of Belonging

- Do you feel like a student?
- Do you feel like you belong at your university? On your course? As a student?

Other diary questions if they didn't answer already

- Family: what does it mean to you? Who would you say is your family?
- Home: what does it mean to you? Where is your home?
- Piece of advice
- One change unis could make to improve things

Looking forward

- Anticipation for next year: any worries? Excitements?
- Hopes and aspirations for rest of degree
- Hopes and aspirations for post-degree: career? life goals?
- Have these things changed?

Reflecting on the diaries themselves
- How did you find the process?
- Did you enjoy it?

Debrief

Would you like to take a pause to get a drink or anything?

I've just got a bit more information to share, then we're all done!

This study has been to explore the academic and personal experiences of university for students who are estranged from their families, for my PhD.

Your voice and experience has been incredibly valuable for this project, and will help to provide greater understanding of estranged students' experiences, and help to make positive change in universities for current and future students.

I will be anonymising the data and using it to write my thesis, academic journals, conference presentations or other outputs. I will keep you in the loop of what is published and created over email.

Instead of using your name, I'll be using a pseudonym or fake name for your data. If you have a preference of a specific name you'd like to use for you, please let me know! There's no real rush, you don't need to know right now, but it'd be good if you could let me know by the end of October so I can finalise them in my writeup.

I've requested the final Amazon vouchers from the university, and I'll send it to you as soon as I get them – hopefully some time this week, but definitely within a few weeks.

Do you have any other questions?

Thank you so much again for your time, voice, and contribution to this study over the past 10 months. If you do have any questions, concerns, further comments or anything, please don't hesitate to contact me via email.

APPENDIX G

FRAMEWORK ANALYSIS EXAMPLE

Participant No.	Pre-uni accommodation	Accommodation at previous uni	First year accommodation	Second year accommodation	Third year accommodation	Fourth year accommodation	Changes due to pandemic?
1	Moved out of family home young, lived in hostels and history of homelessness until moving into a rented flat in the area close to uni	N/A	Living in the same rented flat with her daughter, 20 minutes drive away from uni, describes it as a fine place to live,*"it does me"* (int 1)				
2	Living with his grandparents since estrangement	N/A	Moved into privately owned, catered accommodation focused on connecting home and international students	Remaining at home but hoping to return to campus in future	N/A	N/A	(1st Year) Had the option to stay but chose to come *home* with his grandparents
3	Living with aunt since about 8 years old	N/A	Moved into privately owned halls with a private room and shared kitchen	Year abroad: single room in catered accommodation	Moved back onto campus in a studio flat, 20 minutes walk away from uni	Choosing to stay in the same studio	(2nd Year) Was on year abroad so had to return to the UK, moved back in with aunt
4	Privately renting a flat in the same area as the university	N/A	Continuing to live in that flat	Continuing to privately rent, but moving into a new flat in April and living with her best friend	Continuing to live in newer flat	N/A	(1st Year) Stayed in the same place but boyfriend moved in after being long distance; he then moved out
5	Living in supported housing with a sense of desperation to move out and into a new place	N/A	Moved into a private rented house with second years close to campus for three months; moved into partner's apartment in December of first year that was an hour and a half commute away	Continuing to live in partner's apartment		N/A	(1st Year) Stayed in the same place
6	Living in family home	N/A	Moving into university-owned catered accommodation	Moved into a rented house with girlfriend and friend that was fairly cheap and close to the uni; temporarily moving out in March/April due to housemate disagreements but returning	Living across a rented student house at uni during the holidays, and a flat on placement site (en suite room and shared kitchen)	N/A	(1st Year) Initially moved back home during the pandemic, then became estranged and moved back into halls; cancelled catering and became self-catered and lived with girlfriend in the flat
7	Living with foster carers	N/A	Living into university-owned halls, self-catered with an en suite room	Moved into a shared student house in a very studenty area	Moving into a private flat with her boyfriend further away from the university	N/A	Briefly returned back home during the pandemic, but then kicked out and moved back into halls
8	Renting a flat in first uni city	Continued renting the flat instead of moving into halls	Living in the same rented space with their partner and her son, an hour and a half away from campus				
9	Living with her aunt since 2018	N/A	Moved into student halls a bit earlier than everyone else for sports, shared kitchen and little social space	Moved into a shared student house, after issues with housemates she moved into boyfriend's house in November, then officially moved out of shared house and into temporary place in February, moved onto campus in March in her own place	N/A	N/A	Moved back in with aunt during first lockdown, but regretting it due to lack of independence
10	Living in grandmother's house	Emergency allocations meant she moved into an en suite room in university-owned accommodation which she shared with mature students; moved to new studio flat in new uni city while still studying at first uni	Moved into a two-bedroom private house with boyfriend close to the university	N/A	N/A		Felt isolated so moved to boyfriend's city into a cheap studio flat

APPENDIX H

ETHICAL APPROVAL CONFIRMATION

Outlook

Ethical Approval: EDU-2020-08-31T10:08:52-chkj47

From Ethics <no-reply@sharepointonline.com>
Date Fri 25/09/2020 17:39
To WATERMAN, A████ <a███.waterman@durham.ac.uk>
Cc ED-ETHICS E.D. <ed.ethics@durham.ac.uk>; RAAPER, RILLE <rille.raaper@durham.ac.uk>

Please do not reply to this email.

Dear A███,

The following project has received ethical approval:

Project Title: *Exploring the experiences of estranged students in higher education: a longitudinal study;*
Start Date: *01 November 2020*;
End Date: *30 September 2021;*
Reference: *EDU-2020-08-31T10:08:52-chkj47*
Date of ethical approval: *25 September 2020*.

Please be aware that if you make any significant changes to the design, duration or delivery of your project, you should contact your department ethics representative for advice, as further consideration and approval may then be required.

If you have any queries regarding this approval or need anything further, please contact ed.ethics@durham.ac.uk

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If you have any queries relating to the ethical review process, please contact your supervisor (where applicable) or departmental ethics representative in the first instance. If you have any queries relating to the online system, please contact research.policy@durham.ac.uk.

APPENDIX I

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Participant Information Sheet

Project title: Exploring the experiences of estranged students in higher education: a longitudinal study

Researcher: A███ Waterman, Durham University, School of Education
Contact details: a█████.waterman@durham.ac.uk
Supervisor name: Dr Rille Raaper, Durham University, School of Education
Supervisor contact details: rille.raaper@durham.ac.uk

You are invited to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of my PhD at Durham University. This study has been funded by the UKRI (Economic and Social Research Council, NINEDTP Studentship). It is a collaborative project with Stand Alone, a UK charity who supports people estranged from their families.

This study has received ethical approval from the School of Education Ethics Committee of Durham University.

Before you decide whether to agree to take part it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully. Please get in contact if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. The rights and responsibilities of anyone taking part in Durham University research are set out in our 'Participants Charter':
https://www.dur.ac.uk/research.innovation/governance/ethics/considerations/people/charter/

What is the purpose of the study?
The aim of this study is to explore undergraduate estranged students' academic and personal experiences of higher education. The study will take place from November 2020 until September 2021, and the study is interested in capturing how estranged students experience higher education across an academic year and its vacations. It aims to gather a deeper understanding of estranged students' experiences across the year to inform university and national policy to support students without family support.

Why have I been invited to take part?
You have been invited because you are an undergraduate student who studies at a university in England and are not in your first or final year of studies. You also self-identify as having little or no contact or support from your family ('estranged'). I am interested in learning more about your experiences of university so far and for the rest of this academic year.

Do I have to take part?
Your participation is voluntary, and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw at any time without giving a reason. You are also able to withdraw temporarily from the study at any point, and re-return later in the study if you wish.

Your rights in relation to withdrawing any data that is identifiable to you are explained in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

What will happen to me if I take part?
If you agree to take part in the study, you will be invited to participate in different online activities from the point of recruitment until September 2021.

You will first be asked to take part in an online briefing interview (either via Zoom, Skype, or Microsoft Teams). In this interview, you will be asked some questions about yourself and your studies, and to reflect on your university experiences so far. The interview also acts as an opportunity for you to ask questions about the study, and to introduce you to the diary platform that will be used throughout the study. The interview will last about 1 hour.

The study will then take place across four waves which you will be invited to participate in. These waves take place during the 2020/21 academic year and its vacation periods:
- Wave 1: November 2020 – January 2021
- Wave 2: February 2021 – April 2021
- Wave 3: May 2021 – June 2021
- Wave 4: July 2021 – September 2021

In each wave, you will be invited to write short diary entries about your recent university experiences. You can write as many entries as you would like, but at least once per month. These will be submitted via an online diary platform, which you will be introduced to in the briefing interview. While there will be some guiding questions, you are able to write about any aspect of your university experience that you feel comfortable sharing.

At the end of each wave, you will be invited to participate in an online interview (either via an online call using Teams or a different platform, or an email conversation). In these interviews, we will discuss your diary entries written in this wave and ask further questions about your university experiences. These interviews will last around 1 hour. You can omit any questions that you do not wish to answer, or end the interview early, without giving a reason.

Overall, full participation in the study would involve participating in 5 interviews and writing at least 9 diary entries across a 10-month timeline.

You will receive a thank-you payment of a £20 voucher for each wave you participate in. This will be paid to you after the interview has taken place.

Are there any potential risks involved?
You are free to decide whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time without negative consequences.

It is possible that talking about and reflecting on your university experiences may involve encountering difficult topics and experiencing negative emotions and feelings. These may include, but are not exclusive to, your financial situation, unwanted family contact, accommodation issues and homelessness, mental health concerns, and stigmatisation within your university.

If you experience distress during any of the research activities, you are free to stop and not complete it, without negative consequence. You are able to complete your diary entries and interviews in a space and time that you are comfortable with, and you are able to omit answers to any questions without giving reason. You are also free to withdraw from the study, either temporarily or fully, without negative consequence.

After each interview, and any time on request, you will be provided with relevant resources to support avenues locally and nationally.

Your voice and experiences are valued. Your participation in this study provides greater understanding of estranged students' experiences and helps to make positive change in universities for current and future estranged students.

Will my data be kept confidential?
All information obtained during the study will be kept confidential. If the data is published it will be entirely anonymous and will not be identifiable as yours. Full details are included in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

What will happen to the results of the project?
The researcher expects to publish findings in academic journal articles and conference presentations. Any published work will be shared with you, and you will be kept informed about any emerging outputs. No personal data will be shared, however anonymised (i.e. not identifiable data) may be used in publications, reports, presentations, web pages, and other research outputs.

Durham University is committed to sharing the results of its world-class research for public benefit. As part of this commitment the University has established an online repository for all Durham University Higher Degree theses which provides access to the full text of freely available theses. The study in which you are invited to participate will be written up as a thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives, to facilitate its use in future research. The thesis will be published open access.

All research data and records needed to validate the research findings will be stored for 10 years after the end of the project.

Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study?
If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to the researcher or their supervisor. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please submit a complaint via the University's Complaints Process.

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.

APPENDIX J

PRIVACY NOTICE

Privacy Notice

Durham University

PART 1 – GENERIC PRIVACY NOTICE

Durham University has a responsibility under data protection legislation to provide individuals with information about how we process their personal data. We do this in a number of ways, one of which is the publication of privacy notices. Organisations variously call them a privacy statement, a fair processing notice or a privacy policy.

To ensure that we process your personal data fairly and lawfully we are required to inform you:

- Why we collect your data
- How it will be used
- Who it will be shared with

We will also explain what rights you have to control how we use your information and how to inform us about your wishes. Durham University will make the Privacy Notice available via the website and at the point we request personal data.

Our privacy notices comprise two parts – a generic part (ie common to all of our privacy notices) and a part tailored to the specific processing activity being undertaken.

Data Controller

The Data Controller is Durham University. If you would like more information about how the University uses your personal data, please see the University's Information Governance webpages or contact Information Governance Unit:

Telephone: (0191 33) 46246 or 46103

E-mail: information.governance@durham.ac.uk

Information Governance Unit also coordinate response to individuals asserting their rights under the legislation. Please contact the Unit in the first instance.

Data Protection Officer

The Data Protection Officer is responsible for advising the University on compliance with Data Protection legislation and monitoring its performance against it. If you have any concerns regarding the way in which the University is processing your personal data, please contact the Data Protection Officer:

Jennifer Sewel
University Secretary
Telephone: (0191 33) 46144
E-mail: university.secretary@durham.ac.uk

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Your rights in relation to your personal data

Privacy notices and/or consent
You have the right to be provided with information about how and why we process your personal data. Where you have the choice to determine how your personal data will be used, we will ask you for consent. Where you do not have a choice (for example, where we have a legal obligation to process the personal data), we will provide you with a privacy notice. A privacy notice is a verbal or written statement that explains how we use personal data.

Whenever you give your consent for the processing of your personal data, you receive the right to withdraw that consent at any time. Where withdrawal of consent will have an impact on the services we are able to provide, this will be explained to you, so that you can determine whether it is the right decision for you.

Accessing your personal data
You have the right to be told whether we are processing your personal data and, if so, to be given a copy of it. This is known as the right of subject access. You can find out more about this right on the University's Subject Access Requests webpage.

Right to rectification
If you believe that personal data we hold about you is inaccurate, please contact us and we will investigate. You can also request that we complete any incomplete data.

Once we have determined what we are going to do, we will contact you to let you know.

Right to erasure
You can ask us to erase your personal data in any of the following circumstances:

- We no longer need the personal data for the purpose it was originally collected
- You withdraw your consent and there is no other legal basis for the processing
- You object to the processing and there are no overriding legitimate grounds for the processing
- The personal data have been unlawfully processed
- The personal data have to be erased for compliance with a legal obligation
- The personal data have been collected in relation to the offer of information society services (information society services are online services such as banking or social media sites).

Once we have determined whether we will erase the personal data, we will contact you to let you know.

Right to restriction of processing
You can ask us to restrict the processing of your personal data in the following circumstances:

- You believe that the data is inaccurate and you want us to restrict processing until we determine whether it is indeed inaccurate
- The processing is unlawful and you want us to restrict processing rather than erase it
- We no longer need the data for the purpose we originally collected it but you need it in order to establish, exercise or defend a legal claim and
- You have objected to the processing and you want us to restrict processing until we determine whether our legitimate interests in processing the data override your objection.

Once we have determined how we propose to restrict processing of the data, we will contact you to discuss and, where possible, agree this with you.

Retention

The University keeps personal data for as long as it is needed for the purpose for which it was originally collected. Most of these time periods are set out in the University Records Retention Schedule.

Making a complaint

If you are unsatisfied with the way in which we process your personal data, we ask that you let us know so that we can try and put things right. If we are not able to resolve issues to your satisfaction, you can refer the matter to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO). The ICO can be contacted at:

Information Commissioner's Office Wycliffe House Water Lane Wilmslow Cheshire SK9 5AF

Telephone: 0303 123 1113

Website: Information Commissioner's Office

PART 2 – TAILORED PRIVACY NOTICE

This section of the Privacy Notice provides you with the privacy information that you need to know before you provide personal data to the University for the particular purpose(s) stated below.

Project Title: Exploring the experiences of estranged students in UK higher education: a longitudinal study

Type(s) of personal data collected and held by the researcher and method of collection:
Personal data will be collected through audio-recorded interviews and diary entries. These will include your name, gender, age, university and course. It will also include your experiences of being an estranged student at your university.

Interview conversations will be transcribed, and personal information will be coded and anonymised. The original recording will then be deleted. After submission of diary entries, they will be coded and anonymised and then the original will be deleted.

Lawful Basis
Under data protection legislation, we need to tell you the lawful basis we are relying on to process your data. The lawful basis we are relying on is public task: the processing is necessary for an activity being carried out as part of the University's public task, which is defined as teaching, learning and research. For further information see https://durham.ac.uk/research.innovation/governance/ethics/governance/dp/legalbasis/.

How personal data is stored:
All personal data will be held securely and strictly confidential to the researcher.

You will be allocated an anonymous key for data analysis which will not be connected to your name or identity. Signed consent forms and your key will be stored separately to project data.

All personal data will be stored on a password-protected computer, which will not be available to anyone except the researcher. Audio-recordings from interviews and diary entries will be stored on an encrypted device until they have been transcribed and anonymised by the researcher. No one else will have access to the recording or original diary entries, and they will be erased once the transcript or anonymisation has been completed.

How personal data is processed:
Diary entries are collected to enable detailed investigation of estranged students' experiences of higher education throughout the academic year and its vacations close to when the events happen. Original diary entries will be coded and anonymised, without losing meaning of the original entry, and then deleted.

Audio recordings of interviews are collected to add more context and different perspectives on the entries recorded in the diaries, and to record more information about students' experiences. Audio data will be transcribed using either automated speech to text software or via manual transcription, and then deleted. Both techniques will be quality assured for the accuracy of transcription.

When reporting the findings, all data will be entirely anonymous and will not be identifiable as yours. Anonymised data may be used in the PhD thesis, publications, reports, presentations, web pages, and other research outputs or funding bids.

Withdrawal of data

You can request withdrawal of your data until it has been fully anonymised. Once the data has been anonymised, it will not be possible to be identify you from any of the data held.

If you withdraw participation from the study during the data collection stage, you will be asked whether you would still like your data to be used as part of the analysis, final thesis, and any publications. If you do not consent, all your data will be deleted.

Who the researcher shares personal data with:
Data may be shared with the researcher's supervisors or collaborative partner Stand Alone. Data may also be shared with external services/software approved by Durham University for the collection, transcription, or coding of data. Anonymised data may be included in a secure research archive for future long-term research.

Please be aware that if you disclose information which indicates the potential for serious and immediate harm to yourself or others, the research team may be obliged to breach confidentiality and report this to relevant authorities. This includes disclosure of child protection offences such as the physical or sexual abuse of minors, the physical abuse of vulnerable adults, money laundering, or other crimes covered by prevention of terrorism legislation. Where you disclose behaviour (by yourself or others) that is potentially illegal but does not present serious and immediate danger to others, the researcher will, where appropriate, signpost you to relevant services, but the information you provide will be kept confidential (unless you explicitly request otherwise).

How long personal data is held by the researcher:
Personal data from the interviews and the diary entries will be anonymised and the original deleted within four months. The identifying key to tie your data across different data points together and your consent form will be stored separately and securely and deleted after the PhD is completed.

How to object to the processing of your personal data for this project:
If you have any concerns regarding the processing of your personal data, or you wish to withdraw your data from the project, contact the researcher (A███ Waterman).

Further information:

Researcher: A███ Waterman, Durham University, School of Education
Contact details: a█████.waterman@durham.ac.uk

Supervisor name: Dr Rille Raaper, Durham University, School of Education
Supervisor contact details: rille.raaper@durham.ac.uk

APPENDIX K

CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

Project title: Exploring the experiences of estranged students in higher education: a longitudinal study

Researcher: A███ Waterman, Durham University, School of Education
Contact details: a█████.waterman@durham.ac.uk

Supervisor name: Dr Rille Raaper, Durham University, School of Education
Supervisor contact details: rille.raaper@durham.ac.uk

This form is to confirm that you understand what the purposes of the project, what is involved and that you are happy to take part. Please initial each box to indicate your agreement:

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 08/09/2020 and the privacy notice for the above project.	
I have had sufficient time to consider the information and ask any questions I might have, and I am satisfied with the answers I have been given.	
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
I agree to take part in the above project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.	

Participant's Signature_____ Date_____

(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS)_____

Researcher's Signature_____ Date_____

(NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS)_____

APPENDIX L

SUPPORT RESOURCES SENT TO PARTICIPANTS

Support at your university

Your university may have a dedicated contact who can signpost you to different support your university offers. You can Google your university name + estranged students, which may show you a website with information, or contact the person on Stand Alone's website: https://www.standalone.org.uk/students/supportatyouruniversity/

Support from other organisations

Stand Alone are the national charity supporting people who are estranged from their families. They have guides about things such as student finance and coping with the festive season, and also run group support workshops that you can attend for a low cost. https://www.standalone.org.uk/

If you are care-experienced, you can access support from **Become**. They run a dedicated advice line for care-experienced young people, which you can call if you're having difficulties or have any questions. https://www.becomecharity.org.uk/for-young-people/

Support from fellow students

EaCES is a grassroots initiative of estranged and care-experienced students coming together to bring information and advice for others. They run an Instagram page with lots of information, but also have an incredibly informative handbook with advice and support across over 30 topics.

https://www.instagram.com/estranged_and_ce_students/?hl=en

https://sites.google.com/view/the-eaces-handbook/home

There is also a peer-led national **Discord** group for estranged and care-experienced people, offering socialising, sharing experiences, and peer support in a safe space. I helped to found this group at the start of lockdown, and there is a lovely community that you are able to join. You can join through this link: https://discord.com/invite/VnK88Nc