

# **Mobilising family support: implications for the academic resilience of international students**

**Professor Jacqueline Stevenson, Head of Research,  
Sheffield Institute of Education, Sheffield Hallam University**

**Becca Bland, Chief Executive Officer, Stand Alone**

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## **1. Introduction**

Research has highlighted the importance of family in enhancing UK students' retention and success (Stevenson, 2015, Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). Family support is, for example, mobilised at the point of access to HE, to enhance students' academic success, to enable students to pay for (aspects of) their studies, and to facilitate access to employment post-graduation. In contrast, research with over 500 UK undergraduate students estranged from their families found that a lack of access to familial economic, material, social or emotional support meant that many of these students were at risk of homelessness, were struggling financially, and were working long hours to fund their studies. Unsurprisingly financial stress was the main driver of estranged students withdrawing from their current course, followed by health issues and wellbeing (Bland, 2015). This has significant implications for students' ability to be academically resilient.

Although international students share both the same reasons for estrangement from their families as UK students do (Blake and Bland, 2015), and are likely to have many of the same economic, material, social or emotional needs for family support, little is known about the importance of family to international students, whether closely connected to their families or not. Problematically this means that those tasked with supporting the retention and success of international students may be doing so with an insufficient awareness of the risks to their social and academic resilience as well as their academic, or other, support needs. This, in turn, has significant implications for retention and success.

## **2. Research aim**

In order to fill this gap the aim of the research was to evidence the (variable) importance of family support to international students, to help inform practice and enhance international students' retention and success.

The research questions were therefore:

1. What forms of family support do international students mobilise during their studies?
2. What are the points in the student life-cycle when access to family support matters most?
3. What factors may inhibit international students from being able to mobilise family support?
4. What impact does distance from family have on emotional and social well-being and/or feelings of connection and estrangement?

## **3. Research methodology**

The research primarily took place at Sheffield Hallam University, one of the UK's largest universities with a population of over 4000 international students. Full ethical approval was gained from the university in advance of the data collection.

### **Stage one: piloting the data collection tools**

Recognising the sensitivity of collecting potentially very personal information as well as the need to ensure the questions were appropriate and unambiguous, a focus group of nine estranged students (connected to Stand Alone) were invited to a one day event. The students were interviewed as a group about their own experiences and then worked together to refine and pilot the survey and interview questions.

### **Stage two: the electronic survey**

The survey (developed using Survey Monkey) was sent all home and international students at the research site university. Overall response rates were higher than anticipated but the response from international students was lower.

Towards the end of the data collection period the researchers were contacted by the University of Sheffield who asked to be included in the data collection. Further ethical approval was gained and the survey sent out to University of Sheffield students. The response rates were low and only around 200 survey responses were received. The survey data has, however, been included in this report.

In total there were 1696 survey responses of which 230 responses were from international students.

See Appendix 1: survey questions; Appendix 3: survey respondents' demographic data (Tables 1-5)

### **Stage three: interviews with students**

Twenty one interviews were undertaken with international students. All those who indicated in the survey that they were willing to be interviewed were contacted. Further contact was made with these students until the 20 interviews had been undertaken, with one further interview held after that point to ensure that all those who wanted to be interviewed were given the opportunity<sup>1</sup>.

The sample includes students from different countries, of different ages, ethnicities, religions, gender and sexual orientation, and studying on different courses and at different levels. The sample also includes students with differing levels of connection to family (both overseas and with them in the UK). See Appendix 2: interview questions; Appendix 4: demographic data (Tables 1). A further 21 interviews took place with home students.

Except for the charts relating to conceptualisations of and relationship to family, only data relating to international students has been included in this report.

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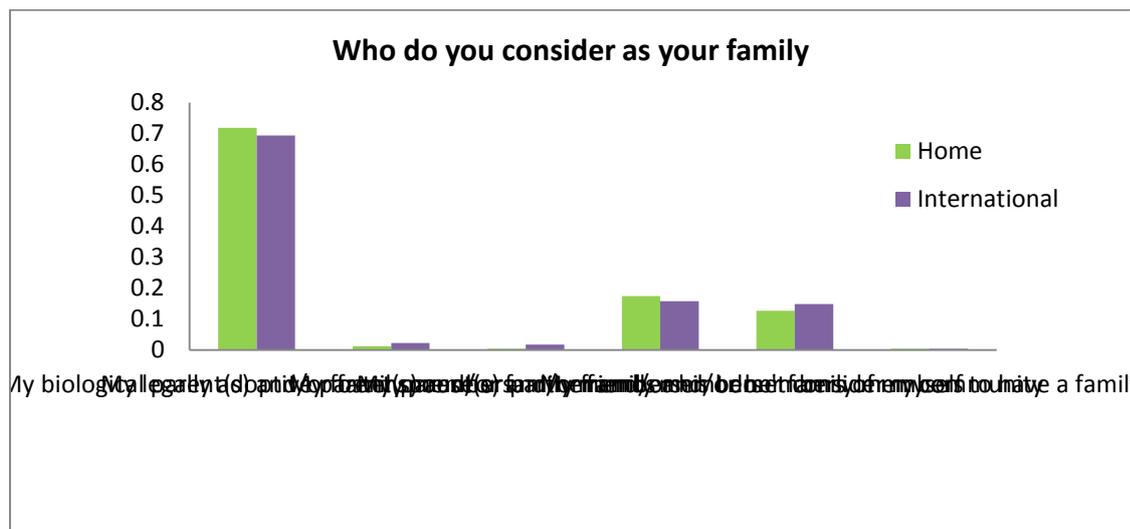
<sup>1</sup> At the point of writing this report there are a further three students wanting to be interviewed. This data will take be used when further dissemination of the research findings take place

## 4. Key research findings

### Conceptualisations of family

In response to the question "Who do you consider as your family?" international students have the same conceptualisations of family as home students but are slightly more likely to consider friends to be family and to include community contacts and relationships as being part of their extended family. Community connections were formed primarily through faith-based organisations (Chart 1)

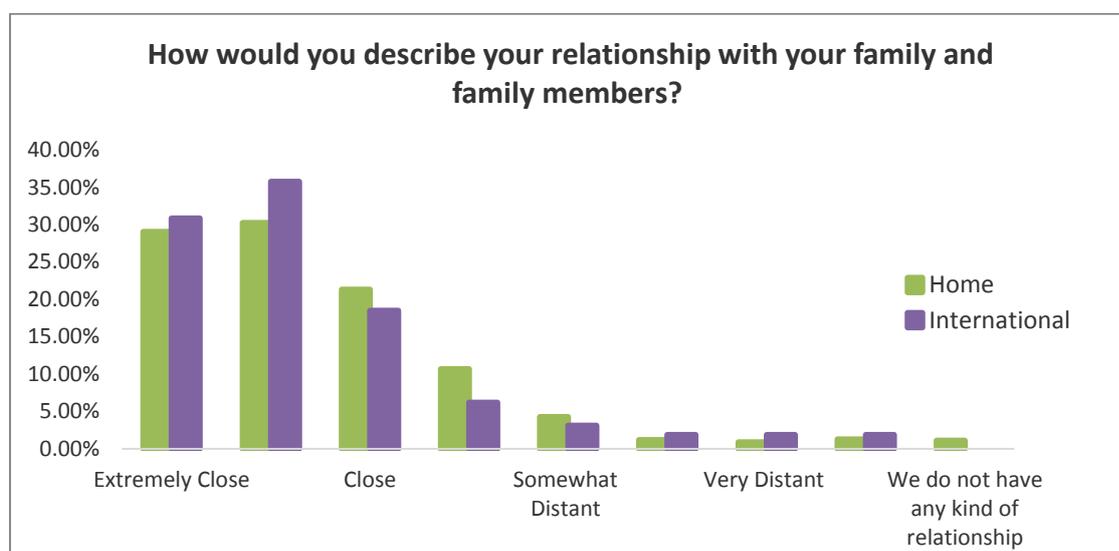
**Chart 1: Descriptions of family**



### Relationship to family

International students were slightly more likely than home students to say they were extremely/very close to family OR extremely/very distant from family (Chart 2)

**Chart 2: Relationships with family**



Closeness to family was not always a positive in the students' lives, however, nor was distance from family a negative. Rather being either close or distant could have both positive and negative implications.

### **Close - positive**

Most of those international students who were close to their families, and remained so throughout their studies, saw this as nothing but a positive opportunity to gain the forms of support that would enable them to be successful in their studies. Family gave the students both financial and emotional help and advice, shared their successes, and helped them through times of failure or disappointment:

My family is my support system. They are always there for me. Their support gives me mental satisfaction and it helps me to do my work/study properly and not worry about anything else<sup>2</sup>. (Survey respondent)

The support from mothers, in particular, was a strong refrain across the data (although for other students this same closeness to mothers also brought an added pressure of not wanting to let them down)

I think that having my mother believe in me helps me with my performance as a student. While I do not have confidence in my abilities, despite looking confident to my friends, internally I am always feeling "not good enough". My mother helps me alleviate that feeling and encourages me to be positive (Survey respondent)

Overall most students were close to their families and, in turn, for most of these students this closeness was largely or wholly positive.

### **Close - negative**

Being close to family had its downsides. In particular, sustaining and maintaining family commitments could be a considerable struggle. Many students were still expected to support other family members from distance. Such support included both financial and emotional contributions. For some students this led to excessive pressure, particularly around exam periods, or when a major incident/ occurred within the family.

My brother had an accident and he was injured, he was in the hospital for few days and had a brain surgery. He is my only brother and I could not be there with him because it was an exams period, also I missed my sister wedding and while the time passes I feel weirder and weirder (Survey respondent)

These multiple expectations were particularly challenging for international students with a very close family network or who had a close connection to their parents:

I don't want my mum to worry. I want her to be content, so I try to cover here and cover here so that she is not worried, because I don't want her to worry about the children, the grandchildren, because when I speak to her she has said 'Oh what is going to happen to the future of this one?'. I don't want her to

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<sup>2</sup> Slight grammatical or typographical changes have been made to a number of the direct quotes

think like that. I want to say 'Don't think about that, their education is covered. I am doing everything, you concentrate on enjoying life. Enjoy your life, enjoy your life, I do not want you to worry about this'. I want my mum to be content.  
(Interview respondent)

For some students, the pressure to support the family at home was compounded by being expected to carve out a more prosperous future for their family through being successful in their international studies.

I feel a sense of expectation; that they so want me to succeed and that can make me feel very stressed at times. I can't fail (Interview respondent)

### **Distant - positive**

It is perhaps unsurprising therefore that having a distance from family could be positive, as it freed up the students, emotionally, to be able to concentrate on their studies:

I feel it's been easier for me to study abroad because I'm not close to my family (Survey respondent)

For some students there was a level of freedom in not having strong connections to family in terms of making educational choices and retaining responsibility for their own successes. For such students decisions around choice of course were not a collective decision, and their decision to study abroad often did not involve their family.

Moreover those with a distant family felt a relative sense of freedom around how they spent their money, and were often working to support their studies rather than relying on family.

In addition, international students with a distant family, did not feel the same need to support other family members emotionally, and cited less pressure to please or be responsible for the progress of their family. During their studies most of these students were able to compensate for not having close family relationships by drawing on emotional support from their friends and peers.

In short, for some international students not having close relationship was seen as bringing a sense of freedom around choice of course and spending/financial choice making, and not having emotional demands made on them. This meant that, overall, they were subject to less pressure than those with close ties.

### **Distant - negative**

For other students, however, being physically distant from family was in itself a cause of stress:

Most times, thinking about the fact that I cannot have a deep conversation with my family makes me depressed and I tend to lose my focus. (Survey respondent)

For those who were both physically and emotionally distant from family this stress was magnified resulting, for some, in quite significant psychological consequences:

I don't have a "safety net" if something goes wrong with studies/work and I can never really just take break. I think that makes me more anxious about the future and generally more stress-prone (Survey respondent)

### It is complex!

Distance is not necessarily a binary relationship (close or distant) rather some students' relationships to family were more complex:

When is distant I miss them, when I am with them, I want to leave and "open up my wings". (Survey respondent)

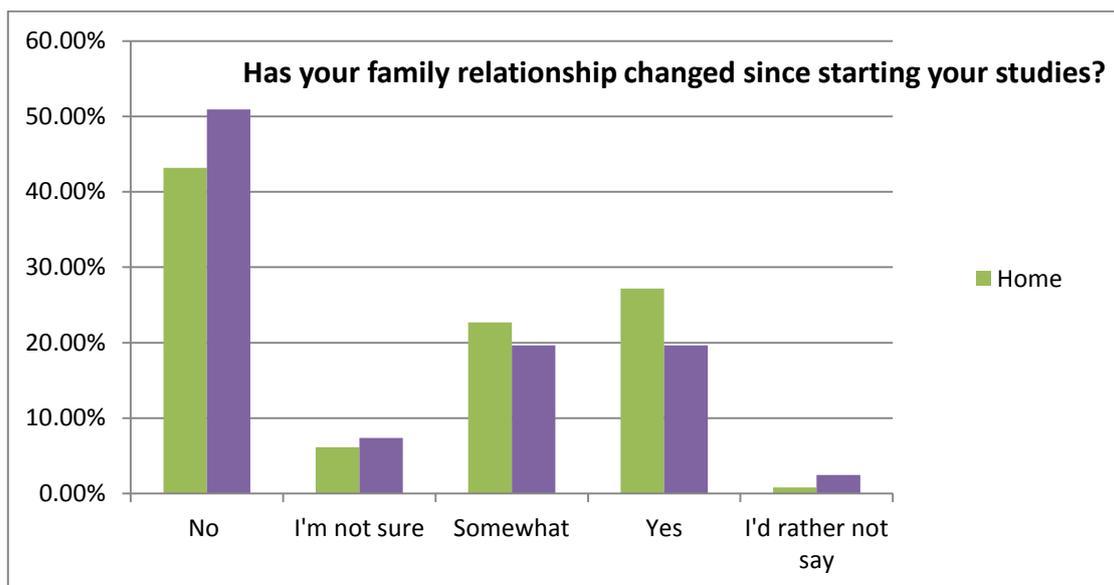
Finally, of course, family is not always at a distance and many international students had both family members in their home countries and had family with them in the UK. This brought its own stresses:

I can't afford childcare so sometimes I come to uni with my kids when a tutor would allow me bring them into class. Other times I miss lectures cos I have no one to stay at my kids. Sometimes I bring my kids to uni hoping to see anyone who would just stay with them for a few while I go in and listen to a lecture but once I did this and university staff spoke very rudely to me that my children were disturbing and I should take them out of the university. (Survey respondent)

### Changing relationship to family during studies

International students' relationships to family were less likely to change during their studies than were home students' relationships to their families

**Chart 4: Changing relationship with family**



Where students relationships to family changed over time this was, for some, a part of the normal evolution of family relationships which occur when parents in particular have to deal

with their children leaving home, with of course in these cases the added worry of them moving overseas.

At first they were on the phone all the time but not it has calmed down  
(interview respondent)

For others there was a more deliberate disentangling from family as this enabled the students to focus on their studies:

My parents, they spend all their life now after I was born, they worry about me, they take care of me so I just want them to be relaxed and to enjoy their life, to don't think too much about me. If I need help I will call them. If I need something I will call them. I need some time and some space to be alone, to get along with myself, my friends, and they worry about me too much which makes me feel very terrible. I feel upset now. So I want them to let me go. It's very hard, especially for Chinese parents (Interview respondent)

It was important to me to become slightly more distant from my family during my undergrads and now PhD. Family problems can be a bit heavy on me especially when I know I can't do anything since I live far away from home.  
(Survey respondent)

This was particularly so where family relationships were negative and/or destructive

It takes me days to recover because emotionally I get drained and it takes time to recover. I end up wasting precious time on nothing. (Survey respondent)

The majority of students more positively maintained their relationships over time, however, with technology playing an important role. Using Whatsapp and Facebook in particular enabled international students to keep in touch with close family - although there were downsides to the ready access to social media with some students commenting that they had to turn their phones off to keep family at bay while they studied.

### **Research question 1: forms of family support**

For those students who had connection to family, family support was made up of emotional support, financial support, psychological, spiritual, or moral support, and practical support, and for some it was all of these:.

All of it. Whatever I need. Love, talking time, being there when you just want to complain, money if needed, hugs, encouragement. (Survey respondent)

The importance of emotional support from family was mentioned by almost all respondents, other than those with a distant relationship

Listening, taking my mind off of negative situations, encouraging me to venture on (Survey respondent)

They remind of all the reasons to be happy (Survey respondent)

Where students had a more distant relationship their friends and their wider community provided emotional support

My friends provide most of the emotional support and guidance which is especially important since I don't know that many persons who did this level of study and I am a distance student. (Survey respondent)

The financial support that came from family was, for many, decisive in whether they could take up the experience of studying in the UK. Of note, however, being in receipt of family money could also be a negative: those with a close connection to family often wanted less financial support from their family than they were receiving and cited a sense of guilt over spending family money on items or experiences they perceived to be frivolous.

It's not good! Because when you spend money you have to think, ah, this is the money my parents try their best to earn this money, so I can't waste them, I have to use it where it should be used, even I go out to the restaurant to eat with my friends, I feel if this restaurant is very expensive, maybe I won't consider, I won't think about this or I prefer to cook at home because it's more cheap, because England really is more expensive than China. So I feel it's such, how to say? Burden? (Interview respondent)

For many international students, however, family provided psychological, spiritual, and moral support. For those from strongly religious backgrounds shared faith and the celebration of that faith was particularly important

Love, prayer and inspirational words (Survey respondent)

The support which they provide is encouragement, discussion, taking an honest advice and praying. (Survey respondent)

Finally, many students, particularly those who had family with them in the UK, received substantial practical support from their families. This was of particular importance to student parents:

They also do everything they can to make my life easier and reduce my burden as I am studying full time and also working 20 hours. (Survey respondent)

## **Research question 2: when does access to family support matters most**

Unsurprisingly, access to family support was therefore most important:

- At academic 'pinch points' such as during exams/assessments, as well as when international students needed to discuss feedback
- In relation to other academic insecurities/ workload /other academic queries such as 'de-coding' academic language
- When international students were wavering and needing support, encouragement, motivation to continue
- When international students were feeling lonely/home sick
- When international students were needing financial/fees support

- When international students were feeling stress/anxiety/depression (which might of course relate to some or all of the above)

I get tons of economic support, they pay for my tuition because I only saved up for a few years so that was enough for me to go to Italy and now I'm working but I still make ends meet with my own pay cheque. I do get emotional support I would say from my mum, my dad is absent in that sense. But, you see, that's the thing, through my dad's economic support, that's the way I realise he shows me that he cares. He's very proud of what I'm doing but it's not something he voices. He shows it, let's say. My mum on the contrary, she does in contrast, she calls me every other day, she asks me about my whole life. I can tell she cares (interview respondent)

### **Research question 3: what inhibits mobilisation of family support**

The single biggest reason that respondents gave for not accessing family support (even where it was possible to do so) related to worries and concerns about elderly parents/other family members

When I feel that one of my sister or brother upset or sick and I cannot do anything, I keep thinking of how to cheer them from a distance or how to make them talk to me. (Survey respondent)

Following on from this was the desire not to be a burden to this same family. This was particularly important where parents were elderly, were not affluent, or were experiencing personal or family difficulties. Many student spoke of not feeling able to share their own concerns in these circumstances:

Times I needed to talk about my struggle on the course and times I felt lonely but haven't wanted to tell them (Survey respondent)

A second significant concern related to the desire not to be drawn in to family difficulties as doing so interfered with the students' studies

Sometimes my Mom does crazy things and talk bad about my dad and it really gives me a hard time. I am supposed to focus on my assignment, but I just can't and it drives me crazy (Survey respondent)

Finally many students were reluctant to ask for further financial support when parents or other family members had already made significant sacrifices to financially support their studies. For some students, however, not asking for further support left them in relatively impoverished circumstances:

They have given me so much already how can I ask for more? I would rather just do without than ask for more (Interview respondent)

#### **Research question 4: Impact of distance**

The key impact of distance, for those who had close connection to family, was emotional impact. A significant number of respondents described feelings of drifting apart from family or of loss of the family connection they used to have

It's not easy leaving your comfort zone and the people you hold dear and constantly are in communication with. It has changes from driving to or simply walking in to the next room for some of my family members to relying on phone and text messages. (Survey respondent)

Absence is a great obstacle that upsets my relationship with spouse and children. (Survey respondent)

Loneliness is a new feeling. Living in a house full of people and suddenly on your own has definitely had a toll on me emotionally to my surprise. After a two month depression phase where I struggled to study and focus, I have overcome it for the most part thankfully. (Survey respondent)

For other students the impact of distance from family was on a more practical level but the emotional consequences were just as profound.

I cannot function to my best capabilities because of the emotional and psychological and physical stress of having to work and study and raise two children and worry about meeting all financial responsibilities. My mind is constantly whirring and thinking of how to afford the next meal for myself and kids, how to pay rent (currently owing two months' rent) and my grades this year have suffered. I literally have no time to even mix with other students or take advantage of the study environment (Survey respondent)

For many students the distance from family, and the stress and anxiety this engendered, was perceived as having a significant impact on their academic studies

I am not able to put 100% effort in my studies somehow it stops me (Survey respondent)

Most times, thinking about the fact that I cannot have a deep conversation with my family makes me depressed and I tend to lose my focus. (Survey respondent)

This made them highly vulnerable to failure and withdrawal. This was compounded by the fact that when the going got tough a fair number of international students were asked by their families if they just wanted to 'come home' and abandon their studies. For some students - stressed, impoverished, lonely and worried about family back home - the temptations to do so was high placing them at risk of early withdrawal.

#### **5. Conclusions and ideas for further research**

Data for this study was collected, primarily across one university and further research to look across the sector would be beneficial, in particular research which could compare

international students' experiences across different types of institutions e.g. pre- and post-92s, large and small institutions, and those with a large number or a small number of international students would be helpful. Moreover a larger data set which would allow for an exploration of both disciplinary differences as well as difference between students from different countries of origin would be helpful in nuancing and disaggregating both experiences and potential institutional responses.

## **6. Informing enhancements to professional practice**

### **Recommendations**

Understanding when and how family support is required and mobilised, or not, by international students is fundamental to understanding:

- Which students might be at risk of leaving early from their studies, and/or
- Which students may struggle to attain academically, and/or
- Which students may struggle to build and maintain effective social and emotional relationships

There are, therefore, specific implications for retention, success and student satisfaction. With this in mind, the following recommendations are designed to guide the development of institutional responses. Three exemplar case studies have been developed (see below). This guidance will be tested and then disseminated across the sector along with further case studies developed over time and used to inform institutional good practice.

### **General recommendations**

- An increase in awareness around students and their family life is necessary for those working with international learners, which may bust certain myths around international students and their families.
- Financial support: international students are not solely from families with wealthy backgrounds. Family networks abroad can make severe financial sacrifices to send a student to study in the UK and their fees may be made up from a patchwork of donations from across the extended family. Expectations built around this family sacrifice can place heavy pressure on students, which, in turn, can have an impact on student success.
- Emotional support: international students may still retain substantial caring responsibilities for their family whilst studying abroad, formally or informally. Students may struggle to balance the pressure of emotionally supporting a family network in their home country, with the demands from their studies in the UK.
- Similar to certain vulnerable student groups, International Students could benefit from a model of support that spans the student lifecycle, from recruitment in their home country through to graduation. This may help those with little family support, and those with caring responsibilities/expectations to retain and succeed whilst studying in the UK.

### **Support recommendations: pastoral**

- Universities should consider putting in place a single point of contact, who can deliver pastoral support, and advocate for the student across the university, in particular with health and wellbeing and finance issues.
- Universities should review their criteria for access to counseling for international students, who may need to discuss and process difficult feelings around their family, lack of family, or the intensity of their formal or informal caring responsibilities.
- Universities and staff who support international students should be aware that some students may not wish to be in contact with their family, and thus support staff should avoid becoming a messenger for unwanted family contact, or encourage a student to get in touch, who does not want to be in touch with a family network.

### **Support recommendations: financial**

- University staff, working in finance, should be aware of the complexities around international student financial support. International Students may be funded through a patchwork of family contributions, and therefore are not always able to provide fees in one lump sum.

### **Support recommendations: academic**

- Academic staff and personal tutors should consider the whole picture of the learner, and be pastoral in approach, asking basic questions which can help the student to feel a sense of trust and confidence in confiding any extenuating circumstances, which may relate to family caring responsibilities, and/or family difficulties. Such trust and confidence can be built by communicating their understanding of the different challenges that family networks (or lack of) may provide for international students.
- Academic staff should consider offering clear and consistent sign posting to bodies within an institution, which assess extenuating circumstances, and support students through the process of proving their family difficulties.
- Academics should be aware of the importance of facilitating the integration of international students in group project, and partner work.

### **Recommendations; the university community**

- The international student community has, by nature, an inbuilt element of transience, which can prohibit international students from making long lasting friendships within this community alone, which are helpful for students to draw on. Traditional practices of housing and pairing international students together (creating a silo effect for international learners) may not stimulate students to feel belonging within an institutional, local or national community.
- Universities should consider providing academic and non-academic mentoring programmes with home students, in addition to international student pairings.

### **Policy level recommendations**

- Institutions and governmental organisations should consider a more robust collection and analysis of data from those international students who fail to retain, which may indicate key reasons for their withdrawal or suspension, and opportunities for the building of institutional support around family circumstances.

A set of ten case studies are being produced, showing different students' experiences and what forms of intervention might make a difference. These will be used to develop guidance/professional development materials for those working directly with international students (academics/international office staff/ counselling services etc.). They will be piloted and tested across a number of institutions before being made freely available across the sector.

## 7. Case studies

### Case study 1: Anja

Anja is a 30 year old Masters student from the Netherlands. She has a distant family, with little physical and emotional connection to either parent. Her parents divorced earlier in her life, and both have since remarried or entered into civil partnerships. She has two sisters who are settled in the Netherlands. Anja has no relationship or connection with her mother, who has tried to reach out and reconcile with her since being at University - in an unwanted way. Although she has a more natural bond with her father, she he does not play a strong role in her life and they are not in regular contact. Her parents were thus largely removed from the process of decision-making when it came to accessing Higher Education and moving to the UK.

I never talked about it I think. They never really asked me what I wanted to do or checked if I was on the right track. It wasn't a topic I think. It was really just my own personal process and I never realised that maybe it is not normal. I didn't realise that other people did discuss that with their parents, I was just really on my own and very independent in that way. My parents never checked with me how I was doing at school and I think they never really knew what I was doing, so I think that's still the same today and it was during my bachelor as well... I've always had to do it on my own and I have a lot of willpower

Anja doesn't get any financial help from her mother, although she was paid a type of alimony during her undergraduate degree in the Netherlands. Moreover during her transition from the Netherlands to University in Sheffield, she depended more on her partner's family for emotional support than her own.

When I first started looking into it, it was more me on my own and I was in a relationship then, and I think his family supported me, but I didn't tell a lot of people in the beginning because I wasn't sure if I was going to get a scholarship, I wasn't sure if I was going to get in and didn't want to get anyone's hopes up, because basically everyone always assumes that I'll be fine and I'll be okay and things always go right for me because I am very independent.

Since being at University, she has depended on the services that the institutions offer and the community of the university to support her, and be there for her as a safety net. It is clear that her friendships have also served as a form of family capital, and she draws on them in a way that other students may draw on their family for emotional support and approval.

One of my friends said, 'What I really like about you is that you really appreciate your friends. I don't know anyone else who appreciates their friends that much'. I think it's really important because of the situation that I grew up in, because I'm just aware that not everyone's got a safety net at home or a lot of support from their family...I think it's important to have a backup if you don't have that, because I didn't have it and I have some friends who didn't have it either so I want to be there and do whatever I can and I want them to know that I'll be there as well.

However, at times the support services at University have let her down, particularly when she was feeling extremely isolated and had a very difficult mental health issue, which she felt required immediate attention.

I did go to the services, like university counselling service and I felt like - I mean I got an appointment in two weeks... but considering what I told them and the forms that I filled in, I think they misjudged the situation.

Students like Anja, who have little family connection or support, are unlikely to be able to draw on forms of family capital when it comes to making decisions about university and studies, and are relying on their own tenacity and independence to get them through their studies. In addition they are far away from the friendship networks that can replace the emotional support of a family member or parent. It is therefore crucial that universities recognize the importance they may hold for such students, in particular the sense of safety net that their staff and services can become for students. Finally it is clear that students like Anja need friendships, and university staff should both realise the importance of student unions and academic groups in helping students find new friendships closer to home and facilitate students' access to them.

### **Case Study 3: Paulo**

Paulo is a 26 year old Italian Masters student. He is from a close family who has fully supported his studies and his move to the UK. He is an only child, his parents have been married for 28 years, and he communicates with them once per week using Skype. His parents are not wealthy, but he receives financial support from his family each month to help meet the costs of living in the UK despite the fact that they are not wealthy.

Both my father and my mum weren't so rich, I mean they can live well but not so rich that they went to a university or something like that.

He originally refused financial help from his parents, as he felt his own money would be enough, but his parents insisted on helping.

They support me also in this part, in the financial part, but I wanted them not to, because it was my decision so I say, 'Okay, no, I want to earn money for the Erasmus now.' Just because, okay, I think it's that I will like to be more

independent. Maybe my parents from one hand they know that I want to be independent and they try to make me more independent, but on the other they always ask me, 'Do you need something?' Every time! So yeah. I receive financial support. If I really need it I will receive it.

Paulo also had to adjust to a different way of studying, as Italian HE does not have the same focus on assignments.

The Italian university and the English university are quite different in the way you pass the exams. In Italy we have written exams or oral exams and you don't have to do assignments, whereas here I just have to do assignments, so it was quite different but I receive a lot of support from the lecturer. I think friendly is the correct way to describe them, compared to my Italian teacher.

In addition he felt he could not call on his parents for help with academic matters, as they had little experience of studying:

So I haven't asked my family because they have never (studied) - Okay, they have studied but they have never done a university, so for them it's like a foreign environment, strange environment. So they don't really know how a university works, especially a foreign university which is quite different from mine.

Although Paolo is unlikely to financially struggle during his studies, it is clear that he does not have access to academic capital outside of the university. Students on postgraduate courses, however, may be seen as having gained the requisite academic capital they need to be successful in their studies. This is, of course, not necessarily the case, particularly for those students who have not previously studied in the UK or have not undertaken English pre-sessional courses. Paolo needs to be made aware of: the different expectations between UK and non-UK courses, in terms of modes of assessment, academic writing styles and standards, referencing protocols, construction and development of arguments, use of linguistic style and terminology. They also need to be made aware of the academic support available to them and how to access this. This needs to happen throughout their studies.

### **Case study 3: Tijal**

Tijal is 34 years old and from Nigeria. He is studying a postgraduate course in Geography and Information systems. He has an extremely close family, a wife and children who are at home in Nigeria. He speaks to his family every day and he still plays a strong role within the family, albeit over Skype. He was an accountant in his home country, but decided to come to study in the UK as it would offer himself and his family better prospects. He is financially supporting his family in Nigeria.

My daughter is already in secondary school, so today they had the open day. She is in school but she is- I keep buying boarding so she will learn ... she should learn to strive on her own just like I did...you have to call them, you have to know how they're doing and then you have to face with also your activity here and it wasn't easy with me.

However, reflecting on family brings up mixed feelings for Tijal, who has to balance the emotions of intensely missing his family, and the loneliness of living without them, with the pressure and responsibility of interacting with them from distance and giving emotional support and maintaining his position as their father.

I found it quite challenging, and at times just...essentially I had been bored, because where ... so you hardly see anyone, so only you inside the room, or doing studies. After then, comparing to when I am back in my country I am used to see my daughter 'Ah daddy'. I have to call them every day they come back from school, call them, the video, call. 'Do you have any homework?', 'Yes', 'Okay, do it', after they do it they say 'Daddy, I finish', I say 'Okay, get mummy to check' you understand. You need emotional satisfaction, you understand, but you don't have that here. So these are the things that you have to battle with it

However, Tijal found support with an advisor from the university, who helped him to find a social life and to integrate outside of the university and in the locality. This gave him a sense of support and acceptance, away from the issues of family life.

The student support advisor, yes, Anne. She talks like a mother and perhaps because she is married she understands it and she was like okay, try and go to the society – she gave me recommendations to be going to societies and going to these conversation clubs and some other things like that, which I did try and it's okay.

There are periods outside of university where Tijal experiences intense loneliness, however, because the routine of school and studying does not exist.

Because when the weekend comes, no school activity, no one to talk to, you don't go to school after because after having a hectic day in school I feel as soon as you come back, you like to take a rest, you go back to the library – because that is how I live my life from home, library, school, home, library, school, home, library, school.

Tijal also noted that there were issues with making friends who were from a different culture to his own, as he was concerned about where the parameters may sit with regards to what was socially acceptable.

Imagine maybe if you have a friend, you try to, like in my country I can be very free, talk to anyone, you understand. But here I have to be very careful. Number one age wise – you never can tell, you understand and then number two, so what you say it might also be offensive to the person.

Students like Tijal need support with the adjustment to living outside of a very close family network, and the transition from family life into life living on their own. Universities should not underestimate the importance of helping students to replace the kind of emotional capital that Tijal has left behind at home in Nigeria with friendships and connections locally. Alongside this, institutions should consider a more comprehensive sense of support with the cultural transition to enable students like Tijal to confidently form friendships outside of their home culture. It is clear that advisors, of the kind that Tijal found, make a huge difference in

helping students who are used to a close and collective family life, to transition. It is wise for Universities to invest in those staff who can facilitate more cross-cultural interaction.

## 8. Institutions and links

Professor Jacqueline Stevenson's profile is here <https://www.shu.ac.uk/about-us/our-people/staff-profiles/jacqueline-stevenson>

Information on Stand Alone is here <http://standalone.org.uk/>

## 9. References

Blake, L. and Bland, B. (2015), Hidden Voices: Family Estrangement in Adulthood; London: Stand Alone available at <http://standalone.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/HiddenVoices.FinalReport.pdf>

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Stevenson, J. (2015), Rethinking 'first in family': using community cultural wealth as a route to student success, paper presented at Open University Widening Participation Conference, October 2015.

Stevenson, J. and Clegg, S. (2011) Possible selves: students orientating themselves towards the future through extracurricular activity, British Educational Research Journal, 37 (2), pp. 231-246.

## 10. Appendices

### Appendix 1: Survey questions

- Are you an undergraduate or postgraduate student?
- Who do you consider as your family? (Please tick all that apply)
  - My biological parent(s) and/or family members
  - My legally adoptive parent(s) and/or family members
  - My foster parent(s) and/or family members
  - My spouse or partner and/or his or her family members
  - My friends and/or members of my community
  - I don't consider myself to have a family
- How would you describe your relationship with your family and family members?
  - Extremely Close
  - Very Close
  - Close
  - Somewhat Close
  - Somewhat Distant
  - Distant
  - Very Distant
  - Extremely Distant
  - We do not have any kind of relationship
  - Other (please specify)
- Is your emotional connection to your family positive or negative for you? (Likert scale)
- Can you describe the amount of physical interaction you have with your family or a family member? For example, seeing and talking to your family or a family member face to face.
- Is this physical interaction largely positive or negative for you? (Likert scale)
- If you communicate with your family or family members, what do you use to maintain communication? (Please tick all that apply)
- Can you describe the amount of non-physical interaction you have with your family or family members? For example, emailing, texting, Skype or speaking on the telephone
- Is this communication largely positive or negative for you? (Likert scale)
- Has your family relationship changed since starting your studies? (Likert scale)
- If it has changed, how has it changed?
- When has having a close or distant relationship to your family been of most importance to you as a student?
- If you feel connected to your family or family members, what kind of support do they offer you?
- When have you most drawn on their support and why?
- If you do not feel connected to your family or family members when has this been most problematic for you as a student?
- Has this affected your student experience? (Likert scale)
- If yes, please let us know more
- Are you aware of any support available to you at the university? (Likert scale)

- Has the university offered you support at any point?
- If yes, what support were you offered?
- What is your age?
- What is your gender?
- Is this the gender you were assigned at birth?
- Are you married, in a civil partnership or cohabiting with a partner?
- How would you describe your sexuality?
- What is your country of origin?
- What is your nationality?
- How would you describe your religion?
- Would you be interested taking part in a short interview to tell us more about your family support and your experience at University? If you answered yes, please leave us your first name, telephone number and email address so we can get in touch

## **Appendix 2: Interview questions**

1. Could you tell me a little bit about your programme of study? Why did you choose this institution/program/course? Do you study full-time/part-time?
2. Can you tell me a little bit about your family? who makes up your family? has this changed over time?
3. Do you have a connection to your family? How would you describe your connection to your family? How much physical connection or support do you feel you have from your family? Why is this? How much communication do you feel you have with your family? Why is this? How do you maintain this communication?
4. How would you describe emotional connection to your family? How if at all do you family support you emotionally? what if anything has this helped you to overcome? what might have been different with more or less emotional support from family?
5. Has your relationship with your family changed since starting university? If so, why is this?
6. When has this relationship or lack of relationship been of most importance to you as a student?
7. Can you give some specific examples; what happened? What was the outcome?
8. What effect has family, or lack of family, had on you: As a student? On your studies? On your social experiences of university?
9. How might things have been different for you? What would have made a difference?
10. Have you accessed any support from your university?
11. Have you thought of withdrawing from your studies? What prevented you from doing so?
12. What if anything has the university done to support you? What could the university have done to support you?
13. Do you feel cared for by your university?
14. Have there been times when you have felt 'wounded' by the university (for example feedback)? how have you dealt with this?
15. What other strategies have you adopted to be successful at university (and thinking beyond)?

### Appendix 3: Demographics of those surveyed

Table 1: level of study	
Level of study	%
Undergraduate	36%
Postgraduate	62%
Pre-sessional English	2%

Table 2: Gender	
Gender	%
Female	55%
Male	43%
Non-binary	<1%
Prefer not to say	1%

Table 3: Sexuality	
Sexuality	%
Heterosexual	58%
Homosexual	5%
Bisexual/questioning	3%
Asexual	<1%
Prefer not to say	33%

Table 4: Relationship status	
Relationship	%
Single	48%
Married	20%
In a relationship	23%
Co-habiting	5%
Prefer not to say	4%

Table 5: Religion	
Religion	%
Christian	41%
No religion	34%
Muslim	11%
Buddhist	7%
Hindu	3%
Jewish	<1%
Sikh	<1%
Prefer not to say	2%

Table 6: Religion			
Country	%	Country	%
China	10%	Ireland	2%
Malaysia	6%	Portugal	2%
India	5%	Spain	2%
Nigeria	5%	Thailand	2%
Cyprus	5%	Hungary	2%
Germany	5%	Australia	2%
Poland	4%	Hong Kong	2%
Pakistan	4%	Indonesia	2%
Italy	4%	Iran	2%
Greece	4%	Libya	2%
Ghana	3%	Romania	2%
Bulgaria	2%	The Netherlands	2%
France	2%	United States	2%
(Other) Argentina; Brunei; Canada; Congo Brazzaville; Czech Republic; Ecuador; Gibraltar; Japan; Jordan; Kenya; Maldives; Malta; Mexico; Nepal; Oman; Romania; Saudi Arabia; Singapore; Slovakia; Somalia; Tanzania; Taiwan; Vietnam; Zambia			17%

#### Appendix 4: Demographics of those interviewed

	<b>Level of study</b>	<b>Connection to family</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Religion</b>
1.	Undergraduate	Very Close	21-25	Male	Italy	Christian
2.	Postgraduate	Very Close	26-34	Male	Malta	Christian
3.	Undergraduate	Somewhat Distant	18-21	Male	Romania	No religion or belief
4.	Postgraduate	Extremely Close	21-25	Female	china	No religion or belief
5.	Postgraduate	Extremely Distant	21-25	Female	The Netherlands	No religion or belief
6.	Postgraduate	Extremely Close	26-34	Male	Ghana	Muslim
7.	Postgraduate	Extremely Close	34-40	Female	Libya	Muslim
8.	Postgraduate	Very Close	41-45	Male	Nigeria	Christian
9.	Postgraduate	Extremely Close	41-45	Female	Nigeria	Christian
10.	Postgraduate	Extremely Distant	41-45	Female	New Zealand	No religion or belief
11.	Postgraduate	Very Distant	26-34	Male	Russian	Christian
12.	Postgraduate	Very Close	21-25	Male	Ghana	Christian
13.	Postgraduate	Very Close	34-40	Male	Nigeria	Christian
14.	Postgraduate	Close	26-34	Male	Cyprus	Christian
15.	Postgraduate	Somewhat Distant	26-34	Male	Nigeria	Christian
16.	Postgraduate	Very Close	26-34	Female	Germany	No religion or belief
17.	Postgraduate	Close	34-40	Male	Nigeria	Christian
18.	Undergraduate	Distant	21-25	Female	China	Christian
19.	Undergraduate	Distant	21-25	Female	Pakistan	Muslim
20.	Undergraduate	Distant	18-21	Female	China	No religion or belief

# Sheffield Hallam University

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STEVENSON, Jacqueline <<http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3097-6763>> and BLAND, Becca

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