

# FACILITATED PEER SUPPORT GROUPS FOR ESTRANGED STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

**ESTRANGED STUDENTS ARE PEOPLE STUDYING WITHOUT THE SUPPORT AND APPROVAL OF A FAMILY NETWORK. STUDENTS IN THIS POSITION OFTEN HAVE NO CONTACT AT ALL WITH THEIR FAMILY AND HAVE EITHER REMOVED THEMSELVES FROM A DYSFUNCTIONAL SITUATION OR HAVE BEEN FORCED TO LEAVE.**

Research from the University of Cambridge indicates that abuse, and particularly emotional abuse, is a key cause of family estrangement, alongside clashes of values and beliefs and mismatched expectations about family roles. There are also a proportion of estranged students who have been disowned for pursuing education against the wishes of their family or extended family network.

The struggles of these young people often go unrecognised by statutory services, and our research with 584 higher education students undertaken in partnership with Student Finance England shows that there is a lack of any kind of social service intervention in roughly 60% of estranged student cases.

Students who are estranged or disowned from their family often feel unacknowledged and invisible. 28% of students in our study told us they did not feel comfortable accessing support within their institution.

Young people who are estranged from their family have indicated, in various pieces of research, that they often fear judgement and stigma when disclosing their circumstances to others. It is often perceived that family should be close and supportive, and so it can be painful and baffling to experience a different family reality, and hard to explain to others who have not experienced the same. This can lead to further social isolation and an inability to share frustrations and struggles.



## Why Facilitated Peer Support Groups?

The Facilitated Support Group is a support group model developed by Stand Alone. The group allows students to meet others at their university in the same position, and make new connections with those who can understand their experience of family. The group encourages peer-to-peer support, while also **ensuring that the needs of all individuals in the group are met** safely through guided facilitation with a professional.

Our groups are structured, allowing students to **feel safe** opening up in a secure and boundaried environment, which will in turn provide a good foundation to **build up trust and share experiences and coping mechanisms**.

The Group is led by a **trained facilitator**, ideally someone qualified and/or experienced in counselling and or a similar discipline. This could be a member of the university / college counselling staff or a facilitator from an external organisation.

The support group dynamic allows participants to feel validated by those who are currently facing similar issues or experiences. The added facilitation allows for the group to remain **regulated and on task, ensuring that safe boundaries are always maintained**.

**University/college Facilitated Peer Support Groups may develop into student-led peer support groups** once the group leaders are comfortable and confident to take over. Continued support from a member of staff is key to ensure the group stays safe and focussed and to offer supervision and mentoring to the group leaders.



### CASE STUDY:

**P.A.U.S.E: People At University Separated or Estranged – developing a peer support group at Salford University with the help of an external charity.**

In November 2016, Arron Pile, Student & Graduate Diversity Officer at Salford University, invited a group of estranged students to a meeting with Dr Sam Grogan, Pro Vice Chancellor (Student Experience). A meeting with the PVC or VC to discuss the many barriers estranged students face and consequently bring about change is part of a university's commitment to the Stand Alone Pledge.

From this meeting came the idea behind **P.A.U.S.E**. The name of the group is an acronym and stands for '**People At University Separated or Estranged**'. Nicole and Brogen, the two students at Salford University who were instrumental in getting the group started, told us:

*"The meaning behind P.A.U.S.E is an opportunity for students going through a hard time with estrangement to be able to press pause on that, it gives people the opportunity to press pause, rest and continue forward."*

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To equip the group leaders to support others, Arron Pile linked up with a local mental health youth charity, 42nd Street, a charity the university already has links with. One of 42nd Street's youth workers facilitated the new support group at the university for 10 weeks. In addition to sharing their experience of estrangement in a safe, facilitator-led environment, this facilitation allowed the group leaders to develop the tools and the confidence to continue to run the group themselves. The group is now a student-led peer support group, supervised by an ongoing relationship with 42nd Street. The charity will return to do a catch-up session in the autumn, review progress and help with planning the way forward. 42nd Street will also train new group leaders as the current leaders move on.

Arron continues to meet with the group leaders regularly to ensure they have the right resources and will also attend group meetings, by invitation from the students, to talk about support available when and where needed. He also provides support with administration, a small amount of funding, and help with promotion of the group across the university. A reciprocal referral arrangement means Arron will mention the group to any new estranged students and if a group member needs support from him, the group leader, will refer them to him for an appointment.

Group members are all self-defined as estranged. The group is promoted for students who have no, little, or negative family support whilst at university. Most of those who are part of the group haven't been defined as estranged by SLC and Arron says he finds that ***“the students with emotional needs that are part of this group are different to the students who gain independent status from the SLC”***.

The group has now been running since March and will be evaluated more formally in the autumn. For Arron, the outcomes have already been met in that the university, working with their estranged students, have provided a safe space to talk for students and to share experiences, which, as he says, can be very powerful.

Working with 42nd Street was crucial. In providing mentoring for the group leaders it helped the group find its feet and allowed everyone to become acquainted. As group leaders, Nicole and Brogen recognise that thanks to the facilitation ***“the group wasn't being run blindly and it helped educate the leaders of how best to proceed and to structure the group”***. Also, as part of the facilitation they have a lot of outsourced support should any of the estranged students need it.

A final piece of advice from Nicole and Brogen on setting up a peer support group.: ***“Make sure there are staff and organisations willing to help you, charities and the university, if it is a university group. Support the student leaders. And promote the group well and creatively.”***

<http://www.askus.salford.ac.uk/page/estrangement>



University of  
**Salford**  
MANCHESTER

**StandAlone**

The logo for StandAlone features the word 'StandAlone' in a bold, orange font, with a blue graphic of four interconnected circles to the right.

## **Further Support, Advice and Guidance from Stand Alone**

We are on hand to offer support, advice and guidance on the development of a Facilitated Peer Support Group within your university, or to answer any specific questions you may have regarding any part of setting up a group.

### **We can help with:**

1. Structuring a facilitated support group effectively
2. Engaging and retaining estranged students in a group
3. Risk management and impact assesment
4. What makes a good Facilitator
5. Continuing as a peer support group after the facilitated group has ended

We have information sheets for each of these topics. If you would like any of the information sheets and/or further support please email Emily or Susan to set up a consultation.

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