

Why should my Students' Union run the Estranged Students Solidarity Campaign in 2019?

Amie Waterman, Founder and President of Durham Estranged Students

Being an estranged student in university or college can be a very isolating experience. When students go home in the holidays and turn our campuses into ghost towns, many estranged students are left behind in empty accommodation blocks. It can be particularly difficult for estranged students at Christmas time, when everyone leaves to spend time with family. Even in term time, when our campuses are thriving, estranged students can experience financial or mental health barriers to participating in university life.

As an estranged student myself studying at Durham University, I'd faced loads of difficulties settling into a university known for extortionate living costs, extravagant formals, and little diversity in the student population. I completed my entire undergraduate degree without meeting any other student who had no family support, even though the [Student Finance stats](#) claimed there were 29 others.

After finding out about Stand Alone and NUS's Estranged Students Solidarity Campaign (ESSC), I was hopeful that my Students' Union in Durham would take it on board. At the start of the 2018/19 year, I met with our Welfare and Liberation Officer and the Campaigns team in the Union to develop a campaign to raise awareness of family estrangement and to bring estranged students together through a peer support network. While I personally led the project, my SU's support was invaluable.

In just one week, our campaign made a huge impact on making Durham a more inclusive community and improving the lives of estranged students. By reading this blog, I hope you'll be able to see some of the positive changes that you can make to a group of students by running or supporting students to run the ESSC on your campuses in 2019.

What did we do in our ESSC week in Durham?

As a student interested in running the campaign who had no experience of student campaigning, I received a lot of helpful advice and support from the Campaigns staff team in Durham SU - from helping me to plan the activities to giving us financial and marketing support to run the events. A few of my friends also helped me to sort out the practicalities, making our campaign ready to go for the last week of November.

The main part of the campaign was running an awareness stall in the SU building. On the stall, we had different posters and materials made by me and my friends, sharing what family estrangement means, and why it can happen, some of the challenges that estranged students face, and the support available in Durham for estranged students. The stand was also home to our 'Pledge Wall', a large sheet of paper which students and staff could sign to share their solidarity with students, but also as a signatory to encourage the Vice Chancellor of our university to sign the Stand Alone Pledge.





We also organised two events in the week. The first was called Estrangement 101, open to all Durham students and staff, where I gave a short presentation about estranged students and led a discussion with participants about how to improve support for estranged students on a student, departmental, and institutional level. Our second event was a social for estranged students to meet in a comfortable environment, eat snacks and chat.

What was the impact of the ESSC in Durham?

The campaign week had several immediate impacts for estranged students in Durham. Several students and staff were involved with the events, leading to 142 signatures on the Pledge Wall and almost 10,000 people seeing our social media posts, raising the profile of family estrangement. We also formed the Estranged Students Network, an online group for estranged students to chat to others in similar family circumstances, without family or friends knowing they were in the group.

Even in the 10 months since the campaign week, the support for estranged students in Durham has continued to grow. I officially founded Durham Estranged Students, a student-led group that campaigns for improved awareness and support and organises socials for estranged students in and out of term-time. The online Network has grown to include students from a variety of family backgrounds and brings students together all year round – including a meetup on Christmas Eve!

In January 2019, Durham University signed the Stand Alone Pledge and promised a package of financial, accommodation, wellbeing, and outreach support for current and prospective estranged students. Following this, I've attended meetings with the university access team, financial support office, and counselling service to ensure support is implemented appropriately and for all students.



I'm also elated that, in June 2019, our campaign won the Best Campaign/Project Award at our Students' Union's Annual Awards, due to the immediate and long-term improvements that the campaign made to the lives of estranged students in Durham.

The campaign was incredibly impactful, on a personal and institutional level. For me as an estranged student, it was the first time I'd met anyone else who had no contact with their families. We now have a group who can advocate for estranged students when anyone in the university is insensitive towards a student's family circumstances. We know other people who are around in the holidays to spend time with and feel less alone when it becomes a ghost town.

We're excited to be organising another campaign for the ESSC Week in 2019. Our plans are to focus on wider definitions of estrangement to broaden the discussion of estrangement and apply it to the Durham context. We're also working to improve awareness and support within departments and colleges to make sure all estranged students have a positive experience of university.

What can YOU do?

I hope that from reading this blog, you can see the impacts on students lives that this campaign can have. In just one week of campaigning we made loads of positive changes across campus, and you can do the same on yours: especially by running it so close to Christmas, you'll be raising awareness and helping to reduce the stigma for those students who may be staying behind.

Running this campaign certainly won't stop you from delivering your other priorities. If your students, officers and staff team work together, you have potential to directly create positive changes for the lives of those you represent.

It's vital that estranged students feel that they belong in our institutions and on our campuses. Estranged students deserve to receive support to prosper academically and socially, without feeling stigmatised for their family circumstances. If our institutions lack awareness or support for this marginalised group of students, our student leaders must take a stand and advocate for positive change.

From my own experience running the campaign last year, I have a few recommendations on what you can do to get started:

- Collaborate with pre-existing societies. As estrangement is more common with LGBT+, trans, and students of colour, working with these societies will help your campaign to be more impactful for these students.
- Talk to your university's estranged student contact (if you have one) to find out the support available, so you can advertise what that is and who can access it as part of the campaign!
- Think about what events you could run as part of the campaign – but make sure that they are free and accessible to increase participation from students. Free food also helped!
- Promote all of your activities during the week using the **#WithEstrangedStudents** on Twitter: it helps you to reach wider and see what all the other SUs are doing!

If you want to know more about how I went about the campaign week or have any questions, please get in touch with me @AmieWaterman97 on Twitter, or email me at amie.n.key@durham.ac.uk.

Best of luck with your campaigns – I can't wait to see all of the amazing things we can collectively do for estranged students in the UK!