# GSU engagement with estranged students

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*Background*

To aid the University in fulfilling the *Stand Alone* Pledge, we made a voluntary request for students who feel that that the definition of *estranged* fits their circumstances to talk to us about their experiences. We presented them with a series of questions about their experience of education, accessing University services, finances whilst studying and other aspects of life outside the classroom, with a view of identifying areas for improving their experiences. In total we spoke to four students. The students had become estranged at varying points in their lives; mostly either just before entering Greenwich or at the beginning of their studies.

*A note on terminology*

As part of our consultation, we asked students whether they felt the term 'estranged' adequately described their situation. There was a mixed view on the use of the term, but some did strongly feel that the word had associations with *strangeness* and had an othering quality. We did not have a universal outcome on whether there would be a preferred term – one that could be considered is *independent*.

*Key findings*

1. All students found that their financial situations were impacted by their estrangement. They found themselves working long hours, with at least two working full-time both in and out of term-time to support themselves without financial support available from families. This was even with receipt of the maximum maintenance loan from SFE. Two of the students had exceptionally bad experiences of employment in highly pressurised environments and poor conditions at work. The students also noted multiple incidents where they had to miss taught elements of their course due to their need for full-time work. In some cases, especially when working anti-social hours, students mentioned that their attention spans were shorter due to tiredness that impacted on their ability to engage with their courses.

2. Students had mixed experiences of Personal Tutors. One student said that their Personal Tutor had been very helpful, and understanding of the pressures that they faced. Other students did not have contact with a personal tutor for significant portions of their studies, or never had contact from a personal tutor. One student who had transferred from another institution noted that they had at least weekly contact from personal tutors in their previous institution, but this was not replicated at Greenwich. Another student mentioned an incident where they had an argument with their personal tutor, partially based on cultural differences in communication, and had struggled to switch tutor or find another point of contact.

3. Most students had accessed support services in some capacity, ranging from counselling through the university to Wellbeing and Disability services. Some of the students found that information on the services was not provided at the outset, meaning that they were left to find them through independent research or word-of-mouth. One student accessing counselling services said that the number of sessions provided was too short to be meaningful. They also noted that peer support services such as *Together All* were not particularly helpful, in that they were not looking for a space to share experiences but for professional, material support to help them during their studies. One student also spoke about having mixed experiences at the student-facing interface of professional services such as finance – they felt that the staff did not respond quickly and that they were often just

given more email addresses to contact, with problems sometimes not being solved at the end of it.

4.  One student was living in university halls and found that the contracts coming to under a year meant that they found themselves in precarious housing situations between contracts. They suggested that a 52 week contact would help to avoid that situation. One student living in private accommodation felt that there was little information provided by the university about how to best search and secure this accommodation, so had to do this on their own.

*Recommendations*

1.  Create a condition within hardship funding qualification so that students declared as estranged are able to access funds.
2.  Create a short guide for students who declare as estranged/independent, with information about how to prove this to SFE, and key services that they may need to access throughout their studies.
3.  Ensure that physical information about support services is provided to all students physically at the point of registration, as well as digitally via email.
4.  Provide information about employment rights, where to get employment advice and on trade union membership, to all arriving students.
5.  Provide 52 week contracts for students living in University Halls.