

Family Matters

An exploration of the role and importance of family relationships for students in UK higher education



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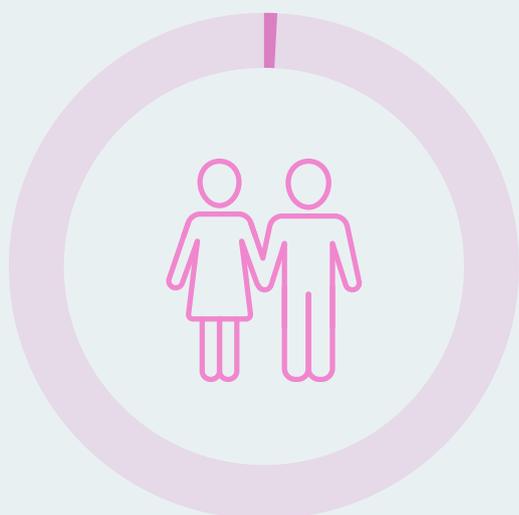
This report draws on the experiences of 1701 students from **Sheffield Hallam University** and **Sheffield University**, who took part in an online study around the impact of family on their studies and their wider student experience. Students were asked a range of questions, to qualify the amount of contact and support they perceived to come from family, as well as the impact of their family relationships on their studies.

We asked students to qualify who they considered to be family, and if these people were biologically related.



71%

considered their biological parents or family members to be family.



1%

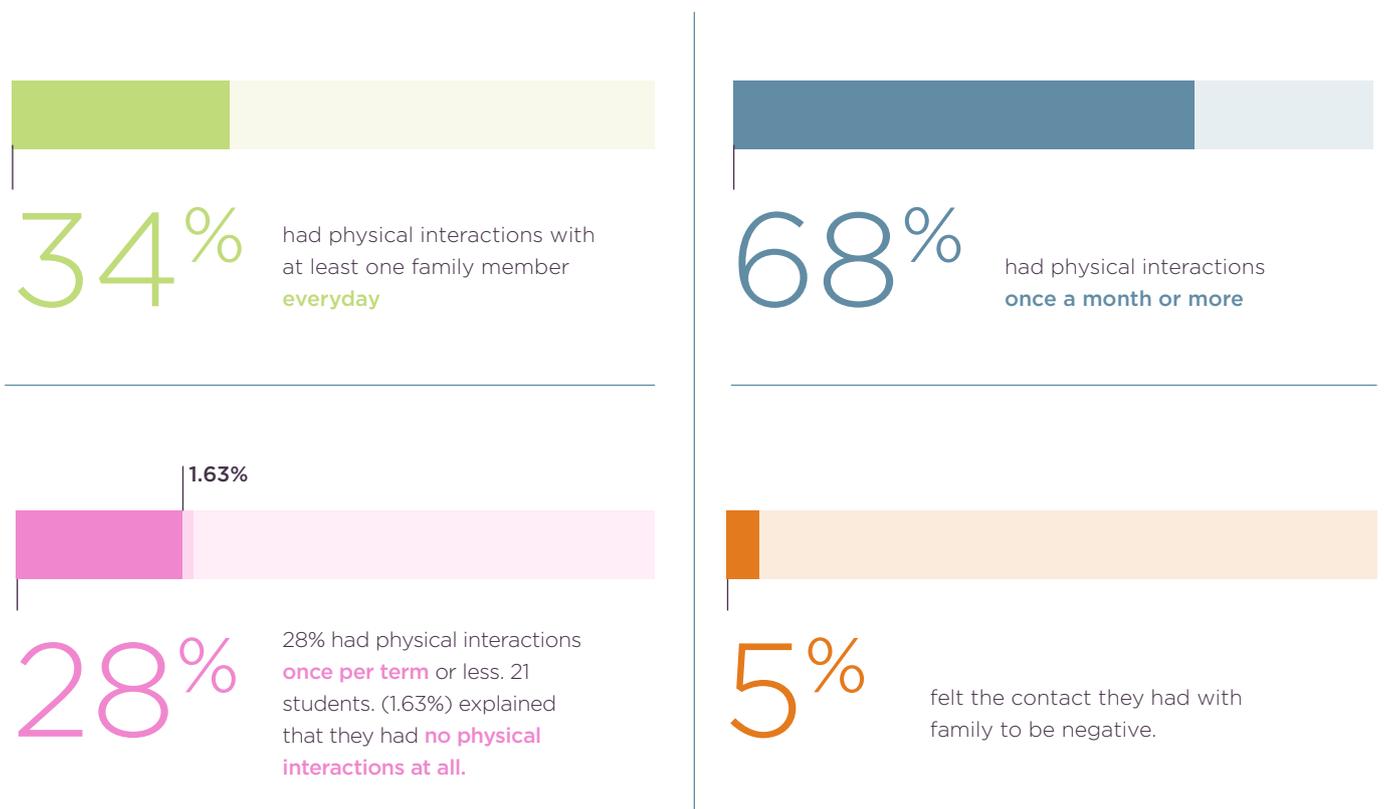
considered their friends solely to be their family, and **2% said they considered their partner or spouse solely to be their family.**

1. How close or distant are students to their families?



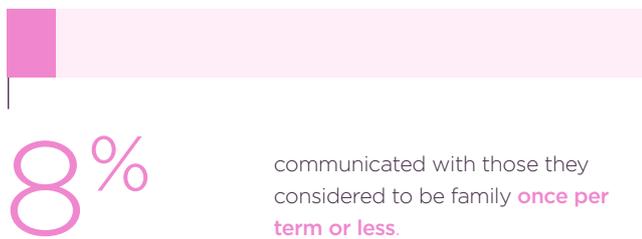
Interactions with family:

Physical contact:



Verbal or non-verbal contact

We asked students how often they usually contacted those they considered to be family by text, phone, email, Facebook, WhatsApp.



students were twice as likely to find family contact negative.

2. Changes in family relationships



26% students said their family relationship had changed since starting their studies

22% of students said their family relationships had somewhat changed.

43% of students said their family relationships had not changed.

Qualitative answers.

How did family relationships change?

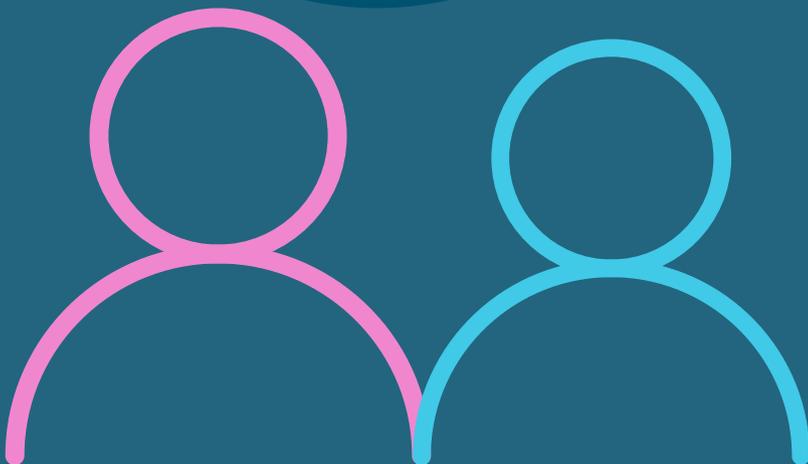
“ We were all very close, but due to me moving out and choosing a uni against their preferences, it has drastically changed. ”

“ More positive, more appreciative of the time and interactions that I have with them as they are a lot less frequent than when I was living with them. ”

“ Since I was no longer living under their roof there was no convenient reason to interact, so we drifted apart. ”

“ My mum struggles to understand my study life and how things work in university which can put a strain on our relationship. ”

“ I am a lot closer to my parents following my decision to leave home and study away from them and not visit very often. ”



3. How did this impact student experience?

When has a close or distant relationship with your family been of most importance to you as a student?

Close

It was clear from the qualitative answers that emotional support was perceived to be important. The respondents' comments indicate that these family relationships mattered most at times of stress, either academic stress around exams, assignments or deadlines, or personal stress with other relationships. Additionally, family mattered for students when such stresses amounted to a crisis of self-belief. In these examples, family members offered students motivation, encouragement, confidence, and reminded them of their aspirations and the bigger picture.

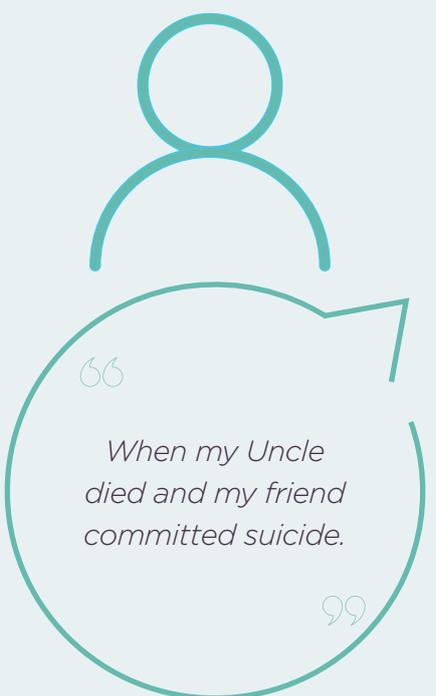
Theme 1:

Emotional support with academic stress



Theme 2:

Emotional support with personal stress



Theme 3:

Emotional support around a crisis of self-belief



Distant

For students with a distant relationship, retaining a sense of distance helped them to cope with their studies. Keeping family issues and unhappiness at a distance was helpful for their sense of focus, particularly for international students. Yet, conversely those with distant relationships, especially if not through choice, also noticed an absence of any kind of celebration around their achievements, and lacked motivational support and encouragement to get through periods of emotional stress and academic challenge.

Theme 1:

A sense of distance helped academic focus



“

When I was doing my undergraduate degree my family caused me a lot of unhappiness, at this point having a distant relationship at the end of the degree was key to my success. ”

“

It was important to me to become slightly more distant from my family during my undergrads and now my doctorate. 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. ”

Theme 2:

A lack of encouragement is noticed

“

Sometimes if I have needed support or to celebrate exam results. I am still close to my sister but she is younger and often depends on me for support and guidance. ”



Theme 3:

Talking to distant family members about academic issues is frustrating.

“

It would be nice to talk to someone about studies and academic interests, other than colleagues and peers, but my only blood relative just says “I don't understand” and “well it's their job to teach you.” ”



When have you most drawn on family support and why?

Students explained that it was the stressful moments of their academic and social life that led them to reaching out for support.



Students mentioned key stressful periods in the academic year when they drew on family support:

- Examination times – for encouragement
- First months of term – for support with the change
- At moments when they consider dropping out – for perspective

Students mentioned specific emotional stressors that had led to them needing emotional support from their family:

- Deaths of friends and family members
- Arguments with friends and flatmates
- Break-ups with a partner or boyfriend
- Health issues, such as a mental health diagnosis



Students mentioned that financial support had been given to them by family as specific points in the year:



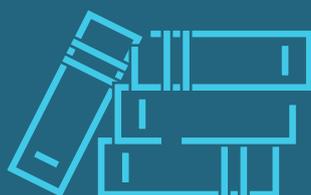
- Moving house – needing money to move
- Before their loan arrives – to cover any late payments
- When they lost their part-time job – to meet their costs of living.

If you do not feel connected to your family or family members when has this been most problematic for you as a student?

The students who felt a lack of connection commented that they experienced a range of disadvantages. Finance was mentioned more frequently, and many students lacked the ability to overcome emotional and financial challenges. This led to personal stress, and triggered feelings of academic frustration when the support was needed to assist with course costs. Students also mentioned that they lacked support with mental health crisis moments, and felt lonely.

Theme 1:

Academic frustrations



“ When I was finishing/starting studies. It's generally a stressful period, but I think it would've been much less so had I had a family I could lean on. ”

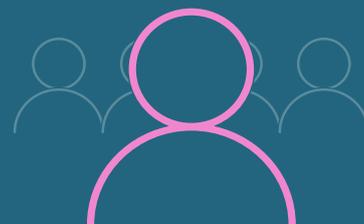
“ During stressful times but especially when I haven't money to afford course trips. I'm missing out greatly. ”

“ I would like to share my interests, worries, successes and all that with them, but they are uninterested. ”

“ I considered suicide before I got help from my doctor. I have no one to talk to and my personal issues seem to be reoccurring. ”

Theme 2:

Feelings of loneliness and isolation



“ I think the thing that frustrates me is seeing others with support in daily tasks like cleaning and cooking. Even just having a chat to someone who cares. Also financial support is a massive thing, especially as a student with reduced income. You only have yourself to rely on so you need to be on it 100% all the time, there's no respite. ”

Theme 3:

Somebody to care



“ Funding is the biggest issue, but it's the little things like just getting a text every now and then from someone who genuinely cares about you. ”

Has your close or distant family impacted your student experience?

Positively

“If it weren't for my family there is no doubt that I would have quit uni in first year. There have been countless times this year and last where I've wanted to leave uni and they've helped me to persevere.”

“Having a close family connection keeps me emotionally strong throughout uni.”

Negatively

“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.”

“I could do better, but I don't know who I'm doing better 'for'.”

“I can't go on course trips that my student friends have obtained funding for. I feel left out.”

“It is really hard to study at this level and still be a fully supportive mum. I feel pulled in lots of different ways.”

Conclusion

It is clear that family plays a significant role in the student experience. The majority of students in these two institutions had contact with their family at least once a week, with over half of the respondents having some form of contact every day. However, a small but no less important percentage had a more distant relationship with their family and did not consider them close. This was much more likely for LGBT+ students.

For those that are close to their family, it is the emotional support that is fundamental. This is delivered at times of stress for students, which may be periods of academic uncertainty and challenge or personal stress with other relationships.

Family support reduces stress, and acts as a motivating factor, helping students to persist and retain and giving confidence when students consider dropping out. Furthermore, family members can be an essential resource to students when facing times of personal challenge with other relationships, such as bereavement or arguments with peers.

It is known that stress is a significant risk factor when it comes to academic success and can inhibit concentration, performance, organisation and the feelings of self-belief. The close family relationships in this research seem to act as a buffer against this risk, and provide an emotional resilience and motivational force.

Although mentioned significantly less in this study, financial and material support is also delivered by family members who act as a type of safety net when other finances fall through. Yet balancing the stresses of close family life with their studies can be a challenge for these same students.

For those with distant relationships, who have made a voluntary and adaptive choice to create distance, they feel it is beneficial to aid academic focus and maximise their chances of success. This is particularly true of international students.

However, other students in this position acknowledged that they lack emotional support through academic and personal challenges. The lack of ability to share their academic experience with family can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation, which is exacerbated by seeing other students with strong and close family relationships. Furthermore, they may feel more isolated at times of financial disadvantage, where the lack of financial and material support from family disrupts their ability to fully take part in their academic studies and student experience. Such students feel more stress and pressure with the experience of completing their studies alone and relying solely on their own initiative and resources.

Despite the lack of overt recognition of the support that families bring, this research shows that families have a critical influence on a student's experience of higher education, either through presence or absence. As the findings are limited to two Universities, it would make sense to explore the topic further with further research, and to ensure all UK and international students can pursue an equitable student experience. By creating stronger policies around family disadvantage, students who lack family support can be endowed with the greatest chance of student success.

Recommendations:



Further research is required to understand the national significance of family for students in all UK higher education institutions, examining the inequities that a lack of family support may bring, as well as the advantages of a close and supportive family unit.



A focus group should be set up within the Office for Students and Universities UK to examine more closely the role of family in the lives of UK students and the policy implications within HE and beyond



Universities need to pay much greater awareness to the small but important percentage of students with distant family relationships. To aid belonging and persistence, institutions and their staff should help those students to celebrate their successes, enable them to take part in their course fully, and reduce the isolation and 'difference' they may feel in the student community.



As a result of further research, a measure of family capital should be created to determine more effectively the level of disadvantage that students may face both in higher education and beyond.