Contact, Constraint and Chance: Understanding Inequality in Higher Education

Student Experiences of Process, Fairness and Targeted Support

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Executive Summary

This report examines how students experience targeted widening participation (WP) support and how everyday university conditions and processes shape equitable participation, belonging and progression. It is grounded in the premise that inequalities are not explained by individual capability, but are produced through routine institutional expectations, administrative pathways and communication practices that affect who can access opportunities, who feels they belong, and how support is encountered in practice.

Objectives and Research Questions

The study focuses on students' lived experiences of targeted academic interventions and the process features through which they are enacted, particularly perceptions of fairness, the language used to describe and address students, and the transparency and ethics of data practices used to identify and contact students. The research is organised around four questions: (1) how students have experienced targeted interventions, (2) where/when/how they think support should be delivered, (3) how they feel about the language used to describe them and their communities, and (4) what expectations they hold around the ethical use of personal data in the design and delivery of interventions.

Approach and Data

The report is based on a qualitative, co-creative design using focus groups and individual interviews. Appropriate ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, participants provided informed consent and were reminded of their right to withdraw, and a distress protocol and signposting to support were in place given the sensitive nature of topics such as belonging, identity and inequality. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022), following an iterative six-phase process of familiarisation, coding, theme development and refinement, and analytic writing. The analysis also adopts a realist evaluative stance, attending to how students' accounts link contexts, mechanisms and outcomes in the lived experience of university life.

Key Findings and Themes

Across the dataset, four themes explain how inequality is experienced and reproduced through everyday practices:

Theme 1: "People Like Us": Identity, Class and Belonging

Students described an early, often visceral awareness of difference that was read through intersecting cues of class, culture, language and life experience, shaping confidence, risk management and participation in academic and social spaces.

Theme 2: The Price of Participation

Students' opportunities were structured by practical realities, time scarcity, commuting and cumulative costs that shaped attendance, presence on campus and access to informal learning and social capital, producing patterns of selective participation and opportunity.

Theme 3: University Processes: "Getting in" vs "Getting on"

Students distinguished between admissions-stage recognition ("getting in") and post-entry expectations and support ("getting on"), highlighting how assumptions of parity between students, unclear systems and uneven advising experiences can undermine confidence and require continual navigation.

Theme 4: Feeling "Seen and Heard": Language and Empathy

Students evaluated support less by what it was called and more by how it arrived and what it demanded: tone, format and continuity determined whether outreach felt like recognition or reduction, and repeated disclosure and unclear data practices could add burden rather than relief.

Discussion: Contact, Constraint and Chance

The discussion draws these themes together into mechanisms that help explain how inequalities are sustained across the student lifecycle. It is structured around contact, constraint, chance, and their interplay, tracing how unequal access to timely contact, constrained resources (time/money/space), and reliance on chance encounters shape who receives support, who can act on it, and who accumulates advantage over time.

How to Use This Report

Section 1 provides the conceptual and evidence base (belonging, conditions of participation and institutional processes). Sections 2–3 set out the methodology and thematic findings, and Section 4 synthesises the analysis into mechanisms to support institutional reflection on the design of targeted interventions, communication practices, and the everyday challenges that shape equity in practice. Throughout the research, our intention was to centre and advocate for students' real voices. To support this, we have included an extensive thematic comment bank in the appendix, which we hope will help those seeking to make change by strengthening their case with contemporary student perspectives and lived experience.

1. Introduction

This report examines students' experiences of targeted widening participation support and the everyday conditions through which unequal participation and outcomes are produced. It is grounded in the view that inequalities are not explained by student "deficits" alone, but are shaped by routine institutional practices, signals and everyday barriers that affect who can participate, who feels they belong, and who can access support when it is needed.

Section 1 situates the study in relevant literature on belonging, unequal conditions of participation (time, money, commuting), and the role of institutional processes and communications in shaping equity. Section 2 outlines the qualitative, co-creative methodology used to capture student accounts. Section 3 presents four analytic themes, moving from identity and belonging to material participation, then to critiques of processes, and finally to how language, recognition and empathy shape whether support feels enabling or reducing. Section 4 discusses the mechanisms that cut across themes and the implications for understanding how inequality is reproduced through everyday systems.

1.1 Identity and Belonging in Higher Education

Research on widening participation (WP) increasingly argues that higher education (HE) is experienced not only as a set of academic demands but as a social field in which legitimacy, recognition, and belonging are unevenly distributed (Thomas, 2002; Priestley et al., 2026). Across contemporary scholarship, "belonging" is treated as relational and politically situated, shaped by inclusion and exclusion practices through which institutions and their communities produce boundaries between insiders and outsiders (Nguyen & Herron, 2021; Stahl & Nguyen, 2024). These boundary-making processes organise students' everyday encounters with teaching, assessment, staff, peers, and spaces, and influence whether students experience the institution as recognising them as legitimate members (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Strayhorn, 2012).

1.1.1 Belonging as Boundaries and Identity Work

Research highlights the growing institutional prominence of belonging while also emphasising its conceptual instability within HE research and practice (Gilani & Thomas, 2025; Gilani et al., 2026). Belonging is frequently conflated with adjacent constructs such as engagement, involvement, or integration, which can obscure how belonging is experienced through identity, power, and inequality (Priestley et al., 2026). In much of the literature, belonging is understood as the felt experience of being accepted, respected, included, and supported, and as the perception of "mattering" to others in the institution (Dost & Mazzoli Smith, 2023). Conceptual frameworks also emphasise belonging's multidimensional nature (Ajjawi et al., 2023) spanning social and academic relationships, as well as spatial and cultural dimensions, which locates

belonging in everyday practices rather than in individual disposition alone (Read et al., 2003; Armstrong-McDowell et al., 2026).

Within this framing, identity work becomes a central mechanism through which students manage their participation and interpret signals about legitimacy and competence (Reay et al., 2009; Reay et al., 2010). Studies of working-class students show that identity may be experienced as "in flux" as students navigate tensions between home dispositions and the normative culture of the university field, producing practices of self-monitoring, strategic adaptation, and ambivalence (McArthur, 2021). Identity work can also become public and political, as students assert their place within the institution and seek recognition through student representative roles, illustrating the institutional conditions under which belonging is secured or withheld (Squire, 2019).

1.1.2 Institutional Habitus and Class Expectations

A key bridge between belonging and the reproduction of inequality is the concept of institutional habitus, which foregrounds how institutional values, routines, and taken-for-granted practices shape student experience and persistence (Thomas, 2002). In this account, unequal outcomes are linked to the alignment (or misalignment) between students' prior experiences and institutional assumptions embedded in procedures, communications, and academic cultures (Thomas, 2002; Reay et al., 2010). Evidence suggests that institutions differ in how their "places and spaces" position students socially and academically, shaping whether belonging is experienced as attainable, conditional, or withheld (Clayton et al., 2009; Ardoin, 2018; Crozier et al., 2019).

First-generation status, commonly defined as students whose parents have not completed a degree (López et al., 2023), often intensifies these dynamics because access to informal guidance about what university looks like may be more limited. Consequently, this increases the burden of interpreting expectations and navigating uncertainty (Collier & Morgan, 2007; Jones, 2017). Research on students' understandings of faculty expectations shows that apparently mundane requirements (for example, what counts as timely, appropriate, or sufficient) can be interpreted differently across groups, with implications for help-seeking and participation (Ahn & Davis, 2020). Consequently, students' lived experience may involve continuous "navigation work" that is rarely captured in institutional metrics, but that can shape their capacity to participate and persist (Richards, 2023; St Clair-Thompson, 2024).

1.1.3 Hidden Curriculum: Accent, Linguistic Norms and Academic Literacies

Academic literacies provide an additional lens on how identity and inequality are reproduced through language and discourse in higher education (Lillis & Scott, 2015). Rather than treating writing and communication as transferable skills, academic literacies approaches conceptualise them as socially situated practices in which

epistemology, authority, and identity are embedded, and in which students must learn the genres and norms of disciplines and institutions (Lillis, 2001). From the student perspective, this involves navigating different discourses and interpreting what counts as evidence, voice, and argument, often where staff expectations are implicit, variable, or only partially articulated (Haggis, 2006).

The hidden curriculum, defined by Laiduc and Covarrubias (2022) as the unspoken norms and beliefs that students are exposed to, aligns with this by foregrounding the implicit expectations and values transmitted through institutional processes, pedagogy, and everyday interactions (Cotton et al., 2013; Koutsouris et al., 2021). The hidden curriculum can reproduce inequality when unspoken rules are more accessible to students with greater familiarity with HE culture or stronger access to informal guidance networks, and when institutional cultures implicitly presume an "ideal" student who already knows how to participate (Read et al., 2003; Reay et al., 2010). Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth framework shows that students bring different strengths, including language skills and the ability to navigate new systems, but these are not always recognised by universities, which can limit what counts as valued participation (Jackson-Cole & Chadderton, 2025). Success in higher education often depends on having access to valued knowledge and understanding how the system works, which is unevenly distributed and rewarded (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Finn et al., 2025). This means that difficulties in belonging may come from institutions not recognising students' existing strengths, rather than a lack of ability or aspiration (Burke, 2012).

Accent, disciplinary language and "knowing the ropes" operate as symbolic status cues, shaping judgements about competence and "fit", and prompting self-monitoring where people expect to be judged negatively (Reay et al., 2010; Donnelly et al., 2022). Hidden curriculum research in England shows that institutional cultures often presume an implied or "ideal" student who already understands unwritten academic practices and interaction norms, meaning that small uncertainties about etiquette, vocabulary or participation can become consequential for engagement (Koutsouris et al., 2021). These dynamics intersect with ethnicity and language in ways that can position students from underrepresented ethnic backgrounds as having to work harder to be read as legitimate members of the academic community, including through strategic self-presentation and selective participation (Fernández et al., 2023; Jackson-Cole and Chadderton, 2025). For students, this can translate into strategic silence or avoidance as a way of managing perceived risk in interaction, rather than reflecting low motivation or inability (Wang et al., 2020).

1.1.4 Belonging, Wellbeing and Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy, emotions, belonging and wellbeing act as the mechanisms through which conditions and everyday practices translate into participation. Belonging is increasingly framed as situated and relational, shaped through micro-practices of teaching,

assessment, feedback and everyday interactions rather than as a stable student trait. (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021). Evidence indicates that belonging is not static or reliably "fixed" by early transition work. First-year undergraduates report an overall decline in sense of belonging across the year, with sharper later-year declines among first-generation students, associated with fragile peer relationships, cultural barriers, weaker feelings of mattering to staff, and silence around finances (Gilani et al., 2026). Students belong in diverse ways shaped by cultural capital about university, socioeconomic experience and perceived similarity (Bettencourt, 2021), with "anti-belonging" often articulated where identity-based experiences make belonging feel unattainable. (Fernández et al., 2023).

Measures of belonging tend to be fragmented, frequently adapted and often weakly validated, complicating comparisons across studies and the evaluation of interventions (Priestley et al., 2026). Consequently, caution is advised against treating these as straightforward indicators of equity or lived experience. Rather than analysing belonging through a simple outcome indicator, an alternative and preferred viewpoint is to regard this as a situated, identity-shaped experience (Dias-Broens et al., 2024).

1.2 Unequal Conditions of Participation: Time, Space, Money and Opportunity

1.2.1 Financial Precarity, Paid Work and Time Poverty

A growing evidence base indicates that unequal participation in HE is produced through the everyday conditions under which students attempt to study. Widespread increases in living costs and subsequent financial strain are affecting students' capacity to fully participate in the academic and social life of university (Freeman, 2023; Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2023; Office for Students [OfS], 2023). A sharp increase in students working part time post-pandemic, combined with a fragile job market, has created a high-pressure situation for students to navigate. This pressure is not evenly distributed, with students from WP backgrounds more likely to experience acute hardship because they may lack the financial safety nets or familial support available to their peers (Benson-Eggleton, 2022). Within the current regulatory framing, these issues are no longer treated as background context (OfS, 2023), yet prolonged attention has forced limited structural change, with uneven, reactive and poorly evaluated institutional responses (Clegg, 2011; Lehmann, 2013).

Evidence suggests that term-time work has become normalised for many students and that paid work frequently competes directly with independent study time (Neves *et al.*, 2025). Callender (2008) shows that term-time working is associated with lower final-year marks and a reduced likelihood of achieving a "good degree", with negative effects increasing as weekly hours rise. The combination of financial pressure and unfamiliar academic norms can create a double disadvantage, reducing both engagement and

outcomes (Robotham, 2012). Moreau and Leathwood (2006) describe students' strategies for "balancing" work and study and argue that the shift of funding responsibility onto students, coupled with limited institutional recognition of term-time work demands, risks reinforcing and exacerbating inequalities, particularly for students from WP backgrounds (Schofield, 2024).

The evidence also indicates that the consequences of financial strain are not only academic. Measures of financial difficulty and worry show more consistent associations with poorer mental health than the amount of debt itself, which helps explain why cost-of-living pressures can undermine engagement and continuation even where students are highly motivated (McCloud & Bann, 2019). In this framing, "time poverty" is best understood as structurally patterned. When students must trade time for money through paid work and travel, they often maintain compulsory attendance while losing the discretionary time required for effective independent study, timely help-seeking, and participation in relationship-rich learning activities (Moreau & Leathwood, 2007; OfS, 2023). Smyth (2017) describes the contemporary university as a "toxic" environment, shaped by neoliberal pressures that prioritise performance over wellbeing. Students are expected to succeed academically while managing financial hardship, often without adequate institutional support. This creates a culture of emotional strain and burnout, particularly for those burdened with conflicting pressures of debt and study (Dabrowski et al., 2024; Giroux, 2020).

1.2.2 Commuting, Space and the Geography of Participation

Commuting, living at home, and constrained access to campus space shape the extent to which students can engage in the academic and social infrastructures of university life. Reasons for commuting are complex and heterogenous (Maslin, 2024) beyond a binary of choice or necessity (Thomas, 2019). Commuter students' participation cannot be understood through a simple "transition away from home" model, because home, family and local community remain central to their student experience and can strongly influence belonging and persistence (Pokorny et al., 2016). Analysis is further compounded by a lack of agreed sector terminology conflating those 'living at home' who may travel long distances, have caring responsibilities or cultural reasons (Maslin, 2024). Commuting students' day-to-day realities disrupt conventional assumptions about integration and highlight the need for institutional spaces and practices that support commuter students to connect and participate.

Commuting intersects with socio-economic disadvantage and first-generation status, with consequences for feeling marginalised and for accessing the "full" student experience (Clayton et al., 2009). Tett et al. (2025) analyse commuter students from lower socio-economic groups in a selective university and conclude that commuter students are too often treated as anomalous in predominantly residential cultures, which can produce exclusionary discourses and unequal access to social and

academic resources. However, recent literature around the "commuter student" experience also cautions against deficit framings. Turner et al. (2024) find that commuter students can display high engagement behaviours and that online learning can help sustain continuity when physical presence is constrained, while also emphasising that institutions must clearly signal "mattering" and design support structures that do not assume abundant time-on-campus.

1.2.3 Capital, Opportunity and Restricted Participation

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital provides a powerful conceptual language for linking money, time and opportunity. In a HE field structured by competition, students with greater economic capital can reduce paid work and "purchase" time for study, while those with less economic capital must convert time into income, often at the expense of academic and social participation (Callender, 2008; Heffernan, 2022). This matters because cultural capital and social capital are also accumulated through participation in the "informal university", including peer networks, societies, staff contact, internships and enrichment activities (Wilcox et al., 2005). When time is scarce, these routes to capital accumulation are disproportionately restricted (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Crozier et al., 2008; Pokorny et al., 2016).

Burke (2012) demonstrates how HE participation processes reproduce inequality through meritocratic discourses that obscure the structural advantages available to some groups but not others. Building on this, Bathmaker et al. (2013) show that middle-class students benefit from privileged access to valued capitals - social, cultural and economic - as well as greater fluency in "playing the game" of HE and graduate recruitment. They argue that intensified competition within the sector encourages ongoing capital accumulation, and that these capitals are not fixed at entry but are continually shaped through resources and opportunities that remain unevenly distributed compounding inequality (Reay et al., 2009; Bathmaker et al., 2013).

The ability to mobilise capital within the field becomes ever more dependent on economic resources and temporal flexibility, making opportunity an unequal outcome of unequal conditions (Fitzgerald et al., 2024; Iqbal et al., 2025). As the cost of participation rises, those with limited resources face restricted capacity to convert aspirations into valued academic and professional outcomes (Callender & Thompson, 2018).

1.2.4 How Conditions of Participation Shape Engagement

Belonging and engagement are important drivers of retention and success, and the most effective practices are early, curriculum-embedded and relationship-rich rather than optional or add-on (Thomas, 2002). Kahu and Nelson's (2017) "educational interface" similarly conceptualises student engagement as emerging from interactions between institutional conditions and student circumstances, mediated by self-efficacy,

emotions, belonging and wellbeing. Under conditions of time scarcity and financial strain, these mediating pathways are weakened: students may have less capacity to sustain positive emotions and wellbeing, fewer opportunities to build belonging, and less time to develop self-efficacy through feedback, practice and support-seeking (Meehan & Howells, 2018; McCloud & Bann, 2019). The "student experience" becomes less a uniform journey and more a set of unequal conditions of participation that structure opportunity. Time poverty, commuting and cost pressures shape who can attend, who can study effectively, and who can access the social and co-curricular opportunities through which capital and advantage are accumulated (Callender, 2008; Bathmaker et al., 2013; Pokorny et al., 2016).

1.3 Institutional Processes as Equity Mechanisms

Institutional processes matter for equity because they shape how students interpret expectations, access opportunities and make use of support (Ajjawi et al., 2023; Banerjee, 2024). While equity is often assessed through outcome indicators and gap metrics, such measures can obscure the procedural conditions through which unequal outcomes are produced (OfS, 2018; Hubbard, 2024). A process-level account therefore shifts attention from what disparities are visible at the level of outcomes to how they are generated through the everyday design and enactment of university systems.

This matters because students' capacity to "get in" and "get on" is influenced not only by formal access to higher education, but by how institutions make expectations legible, how they classify and contact students, how they support navigation, and how much effort is required to act when support is needed. In this section, institutional processes are examined as interrelated mechanisms operating across the student lifecycle: through policy frameworks that define intervention, transition practices that render expectations more or less transparent, admissions processes that shape legitimacy and belonging, advising systems that help students navigate complexity, and targeted support arrangements whose communication, data use and administrative demands affect uptake and trust (Walker & Wilson-Strydom, 2017; St Clair-Thompson & Devine, 2023; Richardson & Stepniak, 2025).

1.3.1 Access & Participation Plans as Intervention Frameworks

In England, Access and Participation Plans (APPs) provide the formal framework through which universities identify risks to equality of opportunity, define intervention strategies, and commit to evaluation across the student lifecycle. The Office for Students positions APPs as risk-based and evidence-informed, requiring providers to specify where disadvantage occurs, what interventions are intended to address it, and how impact will be measured (OfS, 2018). As a result, APPs do not simply reflect institutional priorities but actively shape how inequality is understood and acted upon, influencing which

student groups are made visible, which risks are prioritised, and which forms of intervention are considered legitimate or fundable.

This framing has important consequences for process design. Because APPs require clearly defined risks, measurable activities and evaluable outcomes, they tend to privilege interventions that are legible within institutional planning systems and compatible with available data infrastructures (Clements, 2023; Moores et al., 2024). In practice, this can channel activity towards discrete, targeted programmes or identifiable points of intervention, rather than towards more diffuse changes to everyday practices, cultures or implicit expectations. While whole-of-lifecycle approaches are encouraged, the operationalisation of APPs can therefore lead to portfolios of activity that are extensive but unevenly connected to the routine processes through which students encounter the university on a daily basis.

Critical policy scholarship highlights a related tension. Widening participation is often constructed within institutional and regulatory discourse as a problem to be managed through technical solutions, rather than as an expression of deeper structural inequalities and contested values (Jones, 2021; Stevenson et al., 2010). This framing risks obscuring how inequality is reproduced through ordinary institutional practices, including how expectations are communicated, how support is accessed, and how students are classified and contacted. As Banerjee (2024) argues, gaps in outcomes cannot be understood solely through the presence or absence of interventions, but through the interaction between institutional cultures, process design and uneven access to forms of capital. APPs should be understood not only as planning documents, but as part of the institutional infrastructure that shapes how equity work is enacted. They define the categories through which students are recognised, the points at which support is offered, and the logics through which success is judged. In doing so, they form the backdrop against which subsequent processes operate, including how expectations are made at transition, how students are positioned through admissions and how support is delivered and experienced in practice.

1.3.2 Transition, Hidden Rules & Institutional Transparency

Transition into higher education (HE) is increasingly conceptualised as a critical period in which inequalities emerge or intensify, not simply as a logistical adjustment but as a process of meaning-making through which students interpret what participation requires (OfS, 2023). While institutional approaches often frame transition as the provision of information, induction activity and early academic support, student experience research suggests that the central challenge lies in the uneven visibility of expectations. Students must learn not only what to do, but how to understand what “doing university” involves in practice, including how to interpret assessment demands,

locate support, and evaluate what constitutes appropriate engagement (Leese, 2010; Briggs et al., 2012).

This process is shaped by what has been termed the hidden curriculum: the tacit norms, expectations and values embedded within institutional practices, communication and culture (Cotton et al., 2013; Koutsouris et al., 2021). These norms are rarely fully articulated, yet they structure everyday academic activity, from how to approach staff, to how to interpret feedback, to how to decide when help-seeking is legitimate. Research suggests that access to these “rules of the game” (Finn et al., 2025) is uneven, with students from WP backgrounds more likely to encounter uncertainty around expectations that are assumed rather than explained (Read et al., 2003; Collier & Morgan, 2007). As a result, differences in prior familiarity with HE can translate into differences in confidence, participation and early academic engagement.

Transition gaps are not simply about uneven prior access to knowledge, but reflect differences in how legible institutional processes are to students (Jones, 2017). For example, uncertainty about independent study expectations, academic language and assessment conventions can create hesitation in both participation and help-seeking, particularly where norms around appropriate interaction remain implicit (Ahn & Davis, 2020). This can produce a form of “navigation work” in which students must actively interpret when and how to engage, often under conditions of uncertainty and limited feedback (Richards, 2023). Where expectations are unclear or inconsistently communicated, this interpretive burden increases, shaping who can act quickly and who delays engagement.

Importantly, institutional processes themselves can either mitigate or reproduce these dynamics. Procedures such as assessment guidance, feedback practices and mitigation pathways operate as sites where expectations are made more or less transparent, and where students encounter the system’s responsiveness to their circumstances (St Clair-Thompson & Devine, 2023). Where these processes are accessible, timely and clearly explained, they reduce uncertainty and support early engagement. Where they rely on assumed knowledge, self-initiation or confidence in navigating academic norms, they can reinforce disparities in participation, particularly for students managing competing demands such as time poverty or commuting.

Transition should therefore be understood as a point at which institutional legibility is established. It is not only about providing access to information, but about shaping whether expectations are interpretable, whether support pathways are visible, and whether engagement feels possible and legitimate (Donnelly, 2014). In this sense, early experience is structured not simply by what institutions offer, but by how clearly students can understand and act within what is offered, with implications for confidence, belonging and subsequent participation.

1.3.3 Contextual Offers: Legitimacy and Belonging Effects

Contextualised admissions represent a key institutional mechanism through which students are positioned within the university before and during transition. While primarily designed to address structural inequalities in access, contextual offers also shape how students interpret their legitimacy, academic standing and place within the institution. Evidence from selective English universities shows that the use of contextual data varies considerably across providers, reflecting differences in indicators, thresholds and implementation, with implications for transparency and perceived fairness (Mountford-Zimdars & Moore, 2020). However, student experience research suggests that the significance of contextual offers extends beyond admissions decisions themselves.

Students frequently interpret contextual offers as carrying dual meanings. On one hand, they can enable access and signal institutional recognition of structural disadvantage, supporting aspiration and widening opportunity. On the other hand, they may be experienced as a marker of difference that introduces ambiguity around academic legitimacy, particularly in peer comparison contexts (Bagnall et al., 2025). This ambiguity can shape how students understand their presence in the institution, producing tensions between gratitude for access and concern about how that access is perceived by others. Imposter syndrome, uncertainty or the need to justify one's place are therefore not incidental outcomes, but part of how admissions classifications are interpreted and lived.

These dynamics are mediated through disclosure and social context. Students may choose to conceal, disclose or strategically frame their contextual status depending on audience and anticipated judgement, suggesting that the meaning of contextual offers is actively constructed rather than fixed. Research on foundation years and contextual admissions pathways further indicates that belonging trajectories can differ depending on programme structure and peer context, with some routes functioning as bridging mechanisms and others as separating or stigmatising experiences (O'Sullivan et al., 2019). In this sense, contextual offers operate not only as gateways into higher education, but as early signals that shape identity work, peer interaction and confidence during transition.

Importantly, these effects extend into subsequent engagement with institutional processes. Students' perceptions of legitimacy influence how they interpret expectations, whether they feel entitled to seek support, and how they respond to institutional communication. Where contextual offers are experienced as legitimising and explanatory, they may support engagement. Where they produce uncertainty or stigma, they may contribute to caution, self-monitoring or withdrawal. Contextual offers should therefore be understood not only as access policy instruments, but as

part of the institutional infrastructure through which belonging, legitimacy and participation are negotiated from the point of entry onwards.

1.3.4 Tutoring & Advising: Navigation and Legitimacy Support

Where expectations remain partially implicit following transition, tutoring and advising systems constitute a central mechanism through which students learn to interpret and navigate institutional processes. Rather than functioning simply as supplementary support, these systems translate complex and often implicit expectations into actionable pathways, shaping how students understand what to do, when to do it, and where to seek guidance (Richardson & Stepniak, 2025). In this way, tutoring and advising help make the university easier to navigate by shaping whether academic requirements and support systems feel coherent, accessible and usable in practice.

However, evidence suggests that the effectiveness of these systems is uneven and highly dependent on institutional design and implementation. Personal tutoring is widely positioned as critical to retention and progression, yet is often under-recognised, inconsistently delivered and characterised by role ambiguity (Walker, 2020). Variation in frequency, continuity and purpose means that for some students advising provides a reliable point of interpretation and support, while for others it remains peripheral or primarily administrative. Where advising is experienced as fragmented, generic or discontinuous, its capacity to reduce uncertainty and support navigation is limited.

Tutoring and advising matter not only because they provide information, but because they shape whether students feel recognised, respected and able to trust the support on offer. Perceptions of fair and respectful treatment are central to whether students feel recognised as legitimate participants within the institution, with implications for engagement, identification and wellbeing (Masika & Jones, 2015). Advising interactions are therefore not neutral exchanges of information, but contexts in which students assess whether it is appropriate to ask questions, disclose difficulty, or seek support. Where relationships are perceived as distant, judgemental or inconsistent, students may delay or avoid engagement, even when support is formally available.

In this context, advising systems can be understood as mediating both navigation and recognition. They reduce the effort required to interpret expectations when they provide continuity, clarity and personalised guidance, and they support engagement when interactions are experienced as responsive and legitimate (McGill, 2021). Conversely, where advising relies on student self-initiation, assumes prior knowledge of how to engage, or fails to accommodate variation in student circumstances, it can reproduce the very uncertainties it is intended to resolve. Tutoring and advising should therefore be understood not simply as support services, but as key process mechanisms through which institutional expectations are made actionable and through which students' entitlement to participate is affirmed or undermined.

1.3.5 Targeted Support & Communication

Targeted support aims to mitigate patterned disadvantage by identifying students for additional contact and offering tailored opportunities. Its effectiveness, however, depends less on identification alone and more on how that contact is interpreted by students. Targeting requires recognition: students must understand why they have been contacted, what is being offered, and whether it is relevant to them (Richards, 2023; Bagnall et al., 2025).

Interpretation is shaped by how targeting intersects with identity. Interventions based on contextual or widening participation indicators can signal recognition of disadvantage but also introduce ambiguity around classification and judgement. Students may read targeted contact as support, surveillance, or labelling, depending on how it aligns with their sense of self and the way it is presented. Research across groups such as contextual offer holders and young adult carers shows that engagement is influenced by the acceptability of categories and the anticipated response of others (Cage et al., 2018; Richards, 2023). The wider environment, including peer understanding and institutional narratives, therefore conditions how targeting is received.

Communication plays a central role in this process. Evidence suggests that students are more likely to engage when outreach is explicit in purpose, transparent about data use, and clear about what action is required (Dixon et al., 2025). Where communication is generic, ambiguous or difficult to interpret, students may disengage even when the opportunity is beneficial. Clarity, tone and relevance determine whether support is recognised as opportunity or dismissed as irrelevant contact (Gilani, 2024).

The expansion of data-driven approaches intensifies these dynamics. Targeted contact increasingly relies on institutional data to identify students and trigger interventions, making questions of agency and trust more visible (Cormack, 2016). Students' acceptance of such practices is closely tied to understanding how their data have been used and what outcome the intervention is intended to produce (Prinsloo & Slade, 2016; Birch et al., 2025). Where purpose is unclear or control is limited, targeted support can appear intrusive rather than supportive.

The demands an administrative burden places on a student further shapes whether support is taken up. Access often involves learning what is available, navigating procedures, and managing the emotional effort of engagement, all of which can deter participation even when eligibility is clear (Bennett et al., 2024). These costs are evident in processes where steps accumulate: unclear pathways, repeated handovers, and multiple points of interaction with different parts of the institution. For students with limited time or greater uncertainty, the cumulative burden of these steps can itself become a barrier.

Repeated disclosure is a particularly visible aspect of this burden. Students are often required to restate personal circumstances across services and interactions, turning access to support into a process of ongoing explanation. While some data sharing could reduce this effort, students frequently express a preference for control over who knows what and for what purpose. Reducing barriers therefore involves balancing efficiency with agency, ensuring that information is used in ways that minimise repetition without removing student choice.

Targeted support operates most effectively when it is clearly framed, proportionate in its use of data, and low in the effort required to act. Where processes depend on unclear communication, a politics of listening (McLeod, 2011), ambiguous classification or high levels of administrative effort, they shift the burden of navigation onto students themselves. In this way, support is present but unevenly accessible, reinforcing rather than reducing differences in participation.

1.4 The Current Study

The literature reviewed above indicates that inequalities in HE are produced not only through access, but through the everyday conditions and processes that shape participation once students arrive: assessment and mitigation systems, tutoring and advising infrastructures (Walker, 2020; Richardson & Stepniak, 2025), timetabling and commuting realities, and the administrative burden that determine whether university feels legible and fair. Recent cost-of-living pressures have intensified these dynamics by increasing financial strain and time poverty, raising the stakes of how institutions design and deliver support. Yet much of the sector's evidence base continues to privilege outcome indicators and institution-level metrics, which can be limited in explaining the mechanisms through which inequity is reproduced in practice.

This study addresses that gap by foregrounding students' accounts of targeted academic interventions and the process features through which they are enacted, particularly perceptions of fairness, the language used to describe and address students, and the transparency and ethics of data practices that inform identification and outreach. It treats student voice as more than post-hoc feedback, drawing instead on scholarship that frames voice as a politics of listening and recognition, and on students-as-partners approaches that emphasise power-sharing in problem definition and solution design. By examining how students experience being identified and contacted, what forms of delivery they consider respectful and effective, and what expectations they hold regarding consent, agency and explanation when personal data are used, the study provides a focused bridge from the literature review to a methodology designed to capture lived experience of process fairness and targeted support.

1.4.1 Research Questions

Research Question 1: How have students experienced targeted academic interventions?

Research Question 2: What are students' perspectives on when, where, and how this support should be delivered?

Research Question 3: How do students feel about the language used to describe them and their communities?

Research Question 4: What are students' expectations around the ethical use of personal data to design and deliver interventions?

2. Methodology

2.1 Design

This study was conducted at a research-intensive, selective UK university.

It employed a qualitative, co-creative design to explore student perspectives on targeted support. Appropriate ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection. Throughout the project, student partners were integral in designing materials, facilitating sessions, and contributing to analysis, ensuring that the research process itself reflected co-creation and amplified student voice.

2.2 Participants & Recruitment

A total of 50 undergraduate students (aged 18–25) participated in the study: 34 in focus groups, 16 in individual interviews, and 4 who took part in both. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit students from a range of WP backgrounds. Invitations were circulated via university channels along with a Participant Information Sheet, asking interested students to self-identify against at least one WP criterion (e.g. being first in family to attend university, coming from a low-participation area or low-income background, having a disability, being care-experienced or estranged, or belonging to an underrepresented ethnic group). This self-selection approach was appropriate given the study's focus on personal experiences of disadvantage. All participants provided informed consent electronically and were made aware of their right to withdraw at any time. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect confidentiality, and demographic details for the sample are summarised in Table 1 (all names are pseudonyms).

Table 1. Participant characteristics and widening participation (WP) indicator

Pseudonym	Focus Group (FG)/ Interview (I)	Disability	Ethinicty	First Gen HE	Low Income	Low HE Area	Estranged	Low Performing School	Care Experienced	Refugee/ Asylum	Military Family	Young Carer
Emily	FG	•	•									
Chloe	FG		•	•								
Malala	FG		•	•	•	•						
Jeanette	FG	•	•	•	•	•	•					
Farah	FG		•		•		•					
Penny	FG			•	•	•		•				
Holly	FG					•						
Alara	FG			•	•		•					
Philippa	FG			•	•	•		•				
Sharon	FG		•		•	•						
Mei	FG					•						
Aaliyah	FG			•	•	•						
Zara	FG	•		•	•	•			•			
Melissa	FG		•	•	•				•			
Habibah	FG	•	•		•							
Karima	FG		•	•	•							
Grace	FG		•	•	•	•						
Imogen	FG	•		•	•	•						
Cristina	FG	•		•	•							
Laila	FG		•		•			•				
Makena	FG		•		•	•						
Karabo	FG				•	•						
Madison	FG			•	•				•			
Isra	FG		•	•	•	•		•				
Athena	FG		•	•	•							
Georgia	FG			•	•	•						
Penelope	FG				•	•		•				
Aida	FG		•	•	•	•		•				•
Omar	FG		•	•	•							
Arya	FG			•	•	•		•				
Sophie	FG				•	•						
Darius	FG		•	•	•	•		•				

Table 1. Participant characteristics and widening participation (WP) indicator

Pseudonym	Focus Group (FG)/ Interview (I)	Disability	Ethinicty	First Gen HE	Low Income	Low HE Area	Estranged	Low Performing School	Care Experienced	Refugee/ Asylum	Military Family	Young Carer
Phoebe	FG		•		•	•		•				
Salma	FG				•	•						
Thomas	FG + I		•	•	•	•		•				
Daisy	FG + I				•	•		•				
Joel	FG + I			•	•	•		•				•
Khalilah	FG + I	•	•	•	•	•	•	•				
Jasmine	I			•	•	•		•				
Maisy	I	•		•	•	•		•				
Rana	I		•		•	•		•		•		
Emma	I			•	•	•		•				
Hiba	I									•		
Charlotte	I											
Elaine	I		•	•	•	•	•	•				
Amelia	I		•	•			•					
Jonathon	I		•									
Shantelle	I	•	•		•							
Isla	I										•	
Becky	I				•	•	•		•			

A filled circle (●) indicates that the participant self-identified with that WP indicator. Course titles are omitted to reduce identifiability. Participants may meet multiple indicators.

- Disability – who live with a disability
- Ethnic Background – from underrepresented ethnic backgrounds; from Gypsy, Roma or Traveller communities
- First Generation HE – who are the first in their generation to consider higher education
- Low Income – from low-income backgrounds
- Low HE Participation Area – from areas where participation in higher education is low
- Estranged – estranged from their families
- Below National Average School – who attended schools and colleges where performance is below the national average
- Care Experienced – who are care experienced

Table 1. Participant characteristics and widening participation (WP) indicator

- Refugee / Asylum Seeker – who are refugees or asylum seekers
- Military Family – from military families
- Young Carer – who are young carers

2.3 Data Collection

Following ethical approval, the research team disseminated information about the study, its purpose, inclusion criteria, and what participation involved, via student mailing lists and staff networks. Students who expressed interest and met the inclusion criteria were invited to schedule a session. They received a detailed Participant Information Sheet and gave written consent before taking part.

The first phase of data collection comprised a series of focus groups. In total, four focus groups (each with 8–10 students) were conducted in a private university meeting room. A semi-structured guide, co-designed with a student partner, was used to prompt discussion on topics such as belonging, support experiences, and the language of WP-related activities. Each session lasted approximately 90 minutes. The lead researcher and student partner co-facilitated these discussions, creating a peer-supported environment to encourage candid sharing. All focus groups were audio-recorded (with participants' permission) for accuracy. At the start of each session, ground rules and the voluntary nature of participation were reiterated. Students were reminded that they could decline to answer any question or take breaks as needed, and were given information about support services in case the conversation raised any personal concerns.

In the second phase, individual semi-structured interviews (lasting 60–90 minutes each) were held to explore personal narratives in more depth. Some interviewees were drawn from the focus group cohorts, providing continuity and a chance to expand on group discussions, while others were newly recruited through outreach teams to broaden the participant pool. Interviews were conducted one-to-one (in person or via video call, according to participant preference), audio-recorded with consent, and facilitated by the lead researcher and student partner.

Across both methods, a distress protocol was in place. At the start of each session, facilitators reiterated that sensitive topics (belonging, identity, inequality) might arise and that participants could pause or withdraw at any point. Participants were provided with debrief sheets listing support resources and no adverse incidents were reported.

All recordings were securely stored on university-approved systems and deleted after transcription. Transcripts were anonymised (removing names and identifiable details) to create a pseudonymised dataset for analysis. These data management and confidentiality practices followed the study's approved Data Management Plan.

2.4 Co-Creation & Student Partnership

The research was conducted in partnership with a student co-researcher, which was crucial to the study's ethos and design. The student partner was involved from the outset in developing the focus group and interview guides, helping to frame questions in

an accessible, relevant way. During data collection, the student partner co-facilitated the focus groups, which helped minimise power imbalances and encourage participants to speak openly. This partnership extended to data processing and analysis: the student partner transcribed a large portion of the recordings, enhancing accuracy and adding an authentic student lens to the initial coding of the data. The lead researcher and student partner then collaboratively coded the transcripts and engaged in reflexive discussions to identify and refine themes. This collaboration allowed the team to challenge assumptions and ensure that interpretations resonated with student perspectives. In essence, co-creation was embedded in the methodology not only to improve engagement, but also to enrich the analysis, grounding the findings in student-informed insight and bolstering the validity of the conclusions.

2.5 Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The qualitative data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This approach was selected because it offers a systematic yet flexible framework for identifying patterns of meaning and is well suited to the exploratory nature of the research. The research team (including the student partner) followed Braun and Clarke's six phases: (1) immersing themselves in the data through repeated reading of transcripts, (2) generating initial codes line-by-line, (3) collating codes into potential themes, (4) reviewing and refining those themes against the dataset, (5) defining and naming the final themes, and (6) producing the analytic narrative. Throughout this process, the team adopted a realist evaluative stance, looking at how students' accounts linked contexts, mechanisms, and outcomes in the university environment. The reflexive nature of the analysis meant that the researchers continuously reflected on their own influence and assumptions, often comparing staff and student researcher perspectives to ensure themes were rooted in participants' experiences. The outcome of this collaborative analysis is a set of four main themes (Sections 3.1–3.4) co-constructed by the researchers and participants, forming the basis for the discussion and recommendations in later sections.

3. Analysis

Section 3 presents the qualitative analysis of students' accounts of university life, drawing on interview and focus group data to examine how inequalities are produced and experienced in everyday practice. Rather than treating disparities as the result of individual capability, the analysis traces how ordinary institutional conditions and processes shape what students can access, how safe it feels to participate, and how support is encountered. The section is organised into four themes, moving from identity and belonging (3.1), to the material conditions of participation (3.2), to students' experiences of processes and support systems after entry (3.3), and finally to how communication and empathy shape whether support feels like a recognition of students' circumstances (3.4). Together, these themes build an account of how advantage and disadvantage can accumulate through routine expectations, interactions, and structures, providing a foundation for the discussion that follows.

3.1 "People Like Us": Identity, Class and Belonging

> "You can just tell by how they talk… by how they carry themselves." (Joel)

Students' accounts of university life were shaped not only by what they did, but by who they understood themselves to be in relation to others. Across interviews and focus groups, students described an early and often visceral awareness of difference that preceded any formal academic judgement. Difference was read not as a single attribute but across intersecting lines of class, culture, language, race, and life experience. This sense of distinction became an organising force, shaping how students interpreted interactions, how they assessed social risk, and how they understood their own place in the institution. Feelings of belonging and mis-belonging accumulated through repeated, subtle comparisons with peers who appeared to embody the norms of "the traditional university student". What follows explores how this difference was recognised, negotiated, and managed in everyday life.

3.1.2 Markers of Difference

Students described a highly legible hierarchy on campus, where linguistic, social, and material cues signalled who belonged and who did not. Accent was one of the most cited markers. As Daisy reflected, "Sometimes I don't speak because I feel they'll laugh at my accent." She went on to admit, "I felt stupid at the start. They had all the right words and I didn't." Academic language, in other words, often operated as a gatekeeping mechanism. Material culture added another layer. Students referenced lifestyle differences – "My university friends go out to eat all the time; we never ate out growing up" (Elaine) – and described how these everyday choices revealed not only economic disparity but also differing expectations of "normal" student life. Generational familiarity with HE also played a role. For students whose families lacked HE

experience, university processes felt opaque: “My parents didn’t know anything about uni… I had to figure it out myself.” (Isra). This gap produced a constant pressure to “catch up,” made more acute by time poverty and financial precarity. As Penny noted, “They already know how to speak professionally – I’ve had to learn here.” Khalilah underscored how relational advantage, not just academic background, shapes who feels prepared for any obstacle thrown their way: “They can just call their dad who’s a doctor… I can’t do that.” Across accounts, students described masking the effort behind this self-direction, even as it weighed heavily on their confidence and capacity to engage fully in all aspects of university.

3.1.3 Identity Work: Masking and Performing Belonging

In response to these dynamics, students engaged in continual identity work – a quiet negotiation of how to present themselves, when to speak, and what to reveal. Some embraced their difference as a source of resilience and pride. “We’re all in the same boat, even if our lives are completely different from theirs,” Karabo reflected. Joel expressed a similar defiance: “I couldn’t care less… I am disadvantaged, it’s a fact. I’ve come to terms with it.”

Others, however, adjusted their behaviour to avoid exposure. Khalilah described “just becoming smaller in the room and letting the other voices take over,” capturing how some students withdrew to manage the risk of judgement. Some adapted more visibly, deliberately shifting accent, tone or demeanour to align with perceived norms. For example, one interviewee said, “[My home friends] speak with a very strong chav accent… I used to sound like that” (Charlotte). These strategies often protected students from immediate judgement, but they also took up mental and emotional energy that could otherwise be invested in learning or forming connections.

Alongside these challenges, students identified where they found pockets of comfort. Frequently, it was through peer networks that emerged by chance rather than design: a flatmate who explained how things worked, stumbling into a cultural or faith society, or meeting a small group of friends with similar backgrounds. These networks became essential spaces of affirmation, especially for those who felt out of place in academic settings. As Khalilah observed, “People from our background… we have to try harder.” Students framed such supportive moments as fragile rather than guaranteed, an early indication of the theme of reliance on luck that will be explored later. The very necessity of these chance encounters highlights how much emotional labour students from WP backgrounds invest in appearing to belong, and how little of that labour is visible to the institution.

3.1.4 Classed “Otherness”

Students frequently described a persistent sense of classed otherness – the feeling of being out of place in an environment calibrated around middle-class norms,

expectations, and resources. This sense of difference shaped everyday decisions about participation. Decisions about whether to join friends for food, contribute in group work, or attend social events were shaped by unspoken calculations of cost, confidence, and comfort.

For some, everyday participation meant actively opting out. “If they all want to go out and I’ve brought my packed lunch, they’ll offer to buy me something so I don’t feel outcasted,” recalled Elaine, illustrating how peers tried to include her in activities that strained her budget. Others spoke of drifting to the margins socially: “I couldn’t go out every week like them… so I just stopped being invited” (Arya). Even appearance was read through classed lenses. “You can tell by how they dress… they just look like they belong here,” observed Arya, alluding to the subtle codes of fashion and belongings (from society hoodies to the latest laptops) that can signal who fits the campus mould. Everyday reminders, from MacBooks versus library PCs to paid Ubers versus reliance on public transport, reinforced for these students that the university experience seemed calibrated for peers with more time, more money, and more inherited know-how.

Importantly, students pushed back against any suggestion that they lacked motivation or ambition. On the contrary, many felt they were more invested precisely because they had more on the line. As Rana put it, “I know a degree is life changing… I don’t think I could get opportunities without one.” Several described feeling that they had to put in extra effort just to reach the starting line, even as the institution implicitly expected them to perform “the same as everyone else” once admitted. Pride in their hard work often coexisted with a keen awareness that they were being asked to run an academic race with fewer resources. Emma explained: “At university your home background doesn’t matter anymore, you’re expected to do the same as everyone else.” In her view, this expectation ignored the reality that not everyone was starting from the same place.

3.1.5 Safety Nets and Emotional Strain

Finally, students contrasted their precarious navigation of university with the safety nets available to others. As Penelope noted, “They always have back-up, someone to go to.” Without these buffers, everyday challenges felt amplified and mistakes carried sharper consequences. University was experienced as a high-stakes environment, a place where the financial and emotional investment demanded constant vigilance. This was often framed against an opposing experience where the pressure was less defined by wealth and class, “People who are richer have rich parents and have rich connections so kind of sail through uni…” (Khalilah). The cumulative responsibilities of long commutes, part-time work, caring responsibilities, and academic pressure produced what several described as profound fatigue. Rana captured this: “You can’t take that time to stop and seek support. You can’t even speak the words, otherwise you would just break down.” In other words, the very students who might benefit most from reaching out for help often felt least able to do so, for fear that acknowledging their

distress would make it harder to keep going or signal they did not belong. Class-related difference was not just about who had more money or connections, but about a structural, cultural, and emotional division that shaped whose voices are heard, who accesses which opportunities, and who can sustain a sense of belonging.

In the next section (3.2, "Price of Participation"), the analysis shifts from issues of identity and belonging to the practical constraints that often compound these gaps – examining how time, money, and other ordinary conditions of participation come to reinforce the inequalities identified in this theme.

3.2 The Price of Participation

"The time I spend working, at the back of my mind I'm thinking that this is time I could be using to study, which would improve my grade." (Makena)

The previous section traced how students perceived difference; this section turns to how difference is materially lived. Across interviews and focus groups, students described a university experience structured by practical realities: time scarcity created by long commutes and part-time work; the cumulative build-up of costs embedded in courses and campus life; and the assumption that some students can remain on campus long after teaching ends. These were not intermittent inconveniences but everyday conditions that shaped who could participate, when, and on what terms. Students' accounts show that opportunity is not distributed evenly across the cohort; it is mediated by temporal, financial, and spatial constraints that define students' routines. What follows examines how these constraints curtailed presence, narrowed opportunity, and quietly stratified the student experience.

3.2.2 Time Poverty and the Cost of Attendance

Time poverty emerged as one of the defining characteristics of the student experience for students from WP backgrounds. For many, part-time work was not an optional enhancement but a necessity that structured the entire week. Time became a currency traded between survival and study, forcing decisions that directly shaped academic participation. Maisy captured this starkly in describing what she called "the calculation": "Sometimes I have a one-hour lecture or I've been offered a six-hour shift… what am I going to do? One pays me and the other will take money away from me." (Maisy) Her attendance was therefore dictated not by academic interest but by financial feasibility. Even when she did attend, the experience was framed through a transactional logic: "I didn't miss lectures; I told myself I am paying £9,000 a year, £9,000, £9,000, £9,000." (Maisy) The repetition conveys not motivation, but financial pressure and a form of self-coercion.

These pressures were visible in the rhythms of students' days. Maisy described leaving her supermarket job at dawn, observing: "I'm walking down Oxford Road at 5 a.m. and

students are coming back from their night out... It's strange seeing them drunk and I'm walking to work, probably to pack up their online shopping delivery" (Maisy). She and others often expressed frustration that the university did not adjust to these constraints. "Part-time work is a necessity... the university doesn't understand that shifts have to take priority over timetable changes" (Kahlilah). Such timetabling practices reflect the university's preconceived expectation that all students are available at any given time to attend classes, overlooking and marginalising those who balance financial or caring responsibilities. In practice-based courses, the conflict between economic and academic demands intensified; placement travel, uniforms, specialist clothing, accreditation fees, and DBS checks often required upfront payment, long before any reimbursement arrived. As Penny explained, "It's costing you money to go [on placement]... if you don't have that money in your account at the time, it's incredibly stressful, and you're losing those six weeks where you can't work." Even students receiving bursaries described lingering anxiety around money. "We have money now, but we feel guilty spending it... I've never had money before." (Elaine) This illustrates that a sudden influx of support does not erase years of scarcity or the cautious mindset that accompanies it.

All of these pressures fed a growing frustration. Students noted that the university celebrates WP in principle but often leaves individuals to absorb the material consequences in practice. Across accounts, they argued that genuine inclusion would require systemic change, such as commuter-aware timetables, fully funded placements, and cost-free participation pathways, rather than expecting each student to compensate for structural disadvantages on their own.

3.2.3 Commuting as Structural Exclusion

For students living away from campus, commuting functioned as a limiting factor on energy, presence, and connection to university life. Several students travelled up to two hours each way and had complicated public transport journeys to placement or campus, underscoring the financial burden of travel alongside the time cost. Commuting also fragmented the day as, between scheduled classes, students were often left with stretches of time too long to go home yet too draining to use productively, "Some departments leave everything until last minute which doesn't enable people to plan when they need to work and study" (Zoe). These gaps weakened students' ability to participate in informal learning, join study groups, or build social networks on campus.

The timing of university life further entrenched this divide. Many academic and extracurricular activities took place in the late afternoon or early evening, precisely when commuters had to leave. "I'm there for my lectures then go home... I don't really care for the community as much" (Amy). Opportunities presented as open to all effectively became available only to those able to stay on campus after teaching hours. Amy continued, "I don't feel connected to the university... I'm backwards and forwards

every day", present in lectures but missing from the social and professional spaces where much of the real "university experience" unfolds. In effect, commuting created a pattern of partial presence: students were visible in classrooms but often absent from the informal or extended activities that foster belonging, enrichment, and career growth.

3.2.4 Diminished Social Capital

Time poverty and commuting together produced a form of selective absence, restricting some students' access to the broader university ecosystem. Students often distinguished between meeting the minimum requirement of attendance and truly inhabiting the university as fully as their peers. "Sometimes I think, what do they do with those extra 24 hours a week?" Maisy said, comparing her schedule to that of non-working peers. For many, the spaces that scaffold belonging, confidence, and professional growth, such as societies, networking events, evening seminars, and even casual study sessions, were simply inaccessible. Students distinguished between "showing up" and "doing university", with one noting that while some were able to remain on campus and participate more fully, others were limited to attending lectures before leaving. Students described the cumulative effect of missing out. Shantelle spoke of "feeling left out because you don't have money", referring to opportunities that passed her by for financial reasons. The absence of incidental interactions, such as overheard advice, spontaneous conversations, and connections formed by lingering after class, gradually thinned their social capital. In other words, students with the least time and money also had the fewest chances to acquire the informal knowledge and networks that often underpin success.

Across the dataset, opportunity often depended less on formal systems and more on chance. Whether a student heard about a placement, discovered a community, or found a supportive mentor frequently came down to being in the right place at the right time, or knowing someone who passed along a tip. For students contending with work or distance, those chance encounters were structurally harder to access. In this way, selective presence produced selective opportunity: those with more time, proximity, and financial flexibility accumulated advantages through everyday serendipity, while others, equally capable and motivated, were constrained by circumstance. Over time, reliance on luck rather than intentional design quietly reproduced inequality in who accessed enrichment, guidance, and confidence-building experiences.

3.2.5 Cumulative Structural Barriers

For some students, disadvantage was not a single obstacle but a set of compounding constraints that intensified precarity. Additional factors such as immigration restrictions, disability, chronic illness, estrangement, or unstable housing magnified the pressures described above. Students navigating insecure immigration status described

the emotional and practical costs of managing that situation while pursuing their studies. “I haven’t told anyone about my status… I feel like they will judge me,” confessed Hiba, who also faced legal limits on work and volunteering. She recalled struggling with basic systems early on: “I didn’t know about Canvas for two weeks… a friend had to show me” (Hiba). Lacking family support or familiarity with UK HE, she expended significant energy just to find and understand resources that others took for granted.

Other students confronted acute crises at the intersection of health and housing. Charlotte experienced homelessness on the day of a final exam in a moment that starkly exposed the absence of a safety net when multiple vulnerabilities collided. Estranged students highlighted the emotional and administrative weight of repeatedly explaining their personal circumstances. “It would be a lot of weight off my shoulders if I didn’t have to reiterate myself each time,” noted Amelia, referring to the burden of retelling her story to each new lecturer or support officer. For others, difficult life experiences before university added extra pressure to succeed. “My childhood was very chaotic, I grew up being homeless. I realised early on… if I don’t get a degree then nothing will change and it could spiral,” said Arya, whose determination to earn a degree was tied to the need to break a cycle of hardship. In these accounts, support and understanding often came by chance rather than design. “I had to find these things out for myself,” admitted Amelia, describing how she pieced together help only through personal persistence. For students carrying such layered burdens, the consequences of a setback were steep: a missed deadline, an illness, or a personal crisis was not a mere academic hiccup but a threat to housing, finances, or wellbeing. Each practical barrier added to the next, creating an overwhelming load that individual grit alone could not overcome.

As these examples show, material and structural barriers often intersect, shaping who not only gets into university but who can get on once there. The next section (3.3 University Processes: “Getting in” vs “Getting on”) examines how “getting in” and “getting on” diverge in practice, exploring how institutional processes, from admissions flags to advisory systems, can either mitigate or exacerbate the inequalities outlined above.

3.3 University Processes: “Getting in” vs “Getting on”

“Getting a contextual offer, people might think, well, you got in only because you got a contextual offer whereas my peers all got A*. It makes you feel like you don’t belong.” (Omar)

Another theme to emerge from the data was the sharp distinction students perceived between “getting” into the university and “getting on” once their studies began. “Getting in” refers to processes around admissions and access programmes such as contextual offers, flagging criteria, or HE access pathways. “Getting on” concerns what happens

post-entry: whether students experience parity once enrolled, how advising and support systems serve them, and how clearly the university signals who provides what support (academic departments, the Library, Careers, etc.). Students often felt the two phases were misaligned. In essence, their disadvantaged backgrounds were acknowledged during admissions but not necessarily accommodated in the day-to-day reality of their degree.

3.3.1 "Getting in": Contextual Offers

Many students in our study had received a contextual offer (an admissions offer with reduced grade requirements based on their background). They often expressed gratitude for this, saying it allowed their circumstances to be recognised. "I think contextual offers are a good thing because there is a reason why it's harder for me," said Charlotte, who felt the policy acknowledged the challenges she had overcome. Others described a safety-net effect: "It was helpful for me – it gave me security," explained Emma. For some, a contextual offer was essential. Rana shared, "If I hadn't had a contextual offer, I wouldn't have been able to start university that year," highlighting that this pathway made university attainable. Similarly, Elaine appreciated the reduced pressure during A-level exams: "There is less stress because if I get one grade lower, I can still get in." Thomas described his offer as "an opportunity given to me, so that I can at least be here."

Yet these positive associations were tempered by complex feelings. Some students worried that a lower entry requirement cast doubt on their abilities. "It is a bit off-putting, because it's like saying you can't do as well as other people," admitted Emma, who despite valuing her contextual offer also felt it carried an implicit stigma. A few students even declined to use their contextual offers out of pride or concern for others' perceptions. "I didn't want the contextual offer. I don't like the idea that people think I only got in because of my background," said Mei, who opted to meet the standard entry grades. Charlotte, likewise, noted that her contextual offer is "a subject I avoid with my friends [from home]," reflecting a worry that her achievement might be seen as lesser. Notably, students navigated these feelings differently depending on their audience. Maisy said she never mentioned her reduced offer to friends back home, as she was "one of very few who went to uni" in her circle and did not want to seem boastful or invite judgement. In contrast, among university peers from more advantaged backgrounds, she made a point of bringing it up "to keep people on their toes," emphasising that "people aren't given contextual offers for fun" (Maisy). This highlights a delicate social balancing act: in one context, downplaying the offer; in another, using it to challenge assumptions. Contextual offers were viewed as both an enabler of access and a marker that could inadvertently signal, to self or others, a lack of merit. Students valued the opportunity, but the mixed feelings around disclosure underscore

the persistent stigma attached to needing, and receiving, extra consideration. They also consistently noted the absence of equivalent support after entry.

3.3.2 "Getting On": Academic Expectations

Once students with contextual offers started their courses, a paradox of equality emerged. Despite having their circumstances explicitly acknowledged at admission, once on campus they felt the university expected them to perform like everyone else, with little recognition of any educational gaps. Many described feeling behind academically from the outset. "You're sat there trying to play catch-up" (Daisy), reflecting a common sentiment of needing to scramble to reach the level of their peers. "I spent the first two years of uni feeling really stupid" (Khalilah). Students sensed an unspoken assumption that everyone began on equal footing, an assumption at odds with their reality.

Several described encountering implicit expectations of prior knowledge that they did not have. Elaine recalled struggling in a module heavily based on A-level content she had never covered: "A lot of the content was tricky because I didn't study the A-levels it was based on." Others spoke about a lack of fundamental academic skills upon entry. Jasmine remembered, "I had absolutely no idea how to write an essay. In my college, there wasn't an expectation that we'd go to university, so there was no preparation for that." Similarly, Hiba struggled with university conventions like academic referencing: "I find it hard to understand referencing because I didn't really have much experience of that." These examples point to an assumed baseline of knowledge and skills that was not universal, highlighting a gap between the educational backgrounds of many students from WP backgrounds and the university's expectations. Even those who arrived feeling academically confident soon had their confidence weakened. Amelia, the first in her family to attend university, said, "I was put on a pedestal by my family because they thought I was so amazing, but when I got here, I was like, oh, I don't feel that smart anymore."

Over time, most students managed to find their footing, although it is important to note that this sample consisted of students who had remained on their courses and had proactively chosen to take part in research on WP. It was often only by the middle of their degree that the initial disparities began to fade. "As the course went on, I realised that even people who got top grades were feeling behind, and I saw I wasn't stupid," Rana reflected. Likewise, Jasmine noted that after about 18 months at university she finally felt "on an equal footing with many of my friends." However, the initial period of "sink or swim", without extra academic bridging, left many students from WP backgrounds feeling overwhelmed and less capable at the outset. This may have affected their performance and confidence in those crucial first semesters.

3.3.3 Academic Advising Support

Across focus groups and interviews, students viewed academic advisers as a largely peripheral and bureaucratic support. The advising system was seen as fulfilling a checklist function rather than a personal one. “He just signposts me elsewhere,” said Sharon, reflecting a common feeling that advisers mainly direct students to other offices or resources. The guidance often felt generic and impersonal: “The support has been very general,” reported Jasmine. In some cases, students felt their advisers lacked sensitivity to their challenges. Habibah recalled that her adviser said things that felt tone-deaf, such as recommending unpaid roles, without recognising her financial circumstances. Similarly, Georgia remarked that many staff seem “detached from the experiences of students, especially students like me”. This perceived disconnect sometimes led to strained relationships. “I don’t mesh well with how she likes to advise,” admitted Charlotte, who felt her adviser did not understand her perspective or needs.

Another barrier was the lack of continuity in advising. Some students never had the same adviser for long enough to build trust. “My adviser has changed every year of my degree,” said Habibah, an experience that made it hard to establish rapport. Others recounted more abrupt shifts: “They’ve just changed my academic adviser again; I don’t have that bond with her,” explained Daisy. With each new adviser, students had to re-explain their background and circumstances from scratch, a process they found exhausting. “It’s having to tell them that it started from the day I was born,” said Rana, describing the emotional toll of repeatedly retelling his story. In short, the current model does not prioritise relational consistency, undermining the potential for genuine support. As Emma put it, “It would be nice to have someone to talk to. I think that would massively reassure me.” Her comment underscores the value students place on having a single, trusted point of contact who understands their journey and can offer continuity.

It is worth noting that a handful of students did report positive experiences with academic advisers, though these were the exception. “He’s been really supportive and helpful,” said Elaine of her adviser. “He’s a lovely guy, a bit of a tough cookie to crack, but he offers me support if I need it,” added Joel. These instances show that academic advising can work well when advisers are accessible, consistent, and genuinely invested. In general, however, students felt those qualities were unevenly realised, dependent on individual luck in who their adviser happened to be rather than a guaranteed part of the system.

Theme 3 has shown that even when students navigate official processes, support often feels fragmented and impersonal. Theme 4 therefore turns to the delivery of support, examining how language, identity, and empathy shape whether help feels like genuine recognition or a reduction of the student to a “problem.”

3.4 Feeling “Seen and Heard”: Language & Empathy

“I sometimes see the widening participation efforts as tokenistic. We have all of these students, we need to get them in to hit our targets …” (Jasmine)

Across the dataset, students judged support less by its label and more by how it was communicated, what it enabled, and what it required of them. The difference between feeling recognised and feeling dismissed often hinged on tone, format, and continuity of contact. When interventions felt intrusive or required repeated disclosure, participants tended to disengage and described such efforts as tokenistic. Daisy captured this bluntly, remarking that sometimes WP efforts “can make you feel like a charity chase”. By contrast, support was received more positively when it was opt-in, preserved student agency, and arrived through trusted messengers such as peer groups, familiar staff, or academic Schools. As Sophie put it, “It’s more the way it’s presented… the tone that makes me feel comfortable or not”. In short, communication style often functioned as a proxy for institutional understanding: clarity, care and respect signalled genuine recognition, whereas poorly framed outreach could leave students feeling categorised or scrutinised.

3.4.1 Labels, Identity & Student Communication

Students expressed a wide range of responses to being identified through specific, widening-participation labels (for example, “widening participation”, “WP”, “first-generation”, or other markers used to target support). For some, these labels were matter-of-fact or even validating. “It’s a fact – I am disadvantaged in a lot of ways,” said Joel, while Elaine felt such terms “validate the barriers I’ve had to overcome.” Others, however, found the labels patronising or embarrassing. Khalilah remarked, “It can come across as pity… I’m the same as everyone else”. In other words, the terms meant to identify need could sometimes trigger shame or defensiveness, especially where students felt the terminology did not fit their self-perception.
The phrase “widening participation” (and related tags such as “first-generation”) tended to be accepted as relatively neutral when used thoughtfully, that is, when communications explained why a student was being contacted and what benefit was on offer. Support invitations framed with a clear purpose were particularly welcomed. Some students also interpreted targeted outreach as a positive form of acknowledgement. “Just tell me why. You’ve seen my background and think this could help? Fine,” said Thomas, emphasising that transparency is key. Similarly, Penelope viewed extra opportunities as something she had earned: “If it’s offered to me, I’m taking it. I know what I’ve had to work through.” In these cases, students interpreted outreach as a deserved resource rather than a comment on their ability.

That said, navigating “WP identity” remained context-dependent and sometimes fraught. Several students concealed certain labels or accommodations in some settings while embracing them in others. For example, Maisy shared: “I wouldn’t say I

got in on a contextual offer back home – maybe it's a pride thing... but here [at university] I do." On campus, she claimed her status both as a point of pride and as a way to challenge peers' assumptions, noting that "people aren't given contextual offers for fun" (Maisy). This illustrates the balance students managed in self-presentation: in a home environment, downplaying a contextual offer could feel necessary to avoid implying unfair advantage, whereas in the university environment, naming it could be a way to challenge meritocratic assumptions and explain why additional support is justified.

3.4.2 Peer Support, Community & Recognition

Students were generally more receptive to targeted support when invitations felt meaningful and under their control. Elaine, describing a programme she joined, noted: "In the email it said they identified you might be eligible... I like that. In a way it's like your struggles have been recognised." For her, being singled out for support was experienced as recognition, so long as the opportunity was valuable and presented as a choice. By contrast, when outreach seemed generic or primarily served institutional objectives, students felt categorised without being genuinely understood.

Feelings of belonging and validation were strongly tied to relationships and visible support infrastructures. Students emphasised the importance of facilitated peer networks, empathetic staff, designated points of contact, and continuity from pre-entry programmes into Year 1. Georgia, for example, praised staff who "actually know your story without you re-explaining it." Participants involved in identity-based support communities, such as Black heritage mentoring schemes or bursary-recipient cohorts, described these groups as spaces where "they are trying to build something with us" (Arya) and where "you feel understood straight away" (Karabo). Even sporadic check-ins from a known staff member or group leader could reinforce that someone at the university saw them as a person. However, these tailored communities were unevenly distributed and often peripheral to core academic life, meaning that not all students could benefit from them.

Students drew a sharp distinction between generic mass communications and personalised offers of support, interpreting the latter as more genuine. Where proactive outreach or peer-community structures were absent, many students said they relied on luck or personal initiative to find supportive networks. A number of participants also described finding their strongest sense of belonging outside of university, in work or family circles. Amelia, for example, found more comfort with supermarket colleagues than classmates: "They are my people... I connect with them." Similarly, Penny shared, "I feel more myself at work than at uni. People there get my life." These comments suggest that students felt most at home where they did not have to translate themselves or conceal aspects of their identity.

3.4.3 Burden of Disclosure & Data Ambiguity

A persistent finding was the emotional labour students expended in accessing support. Many were unsure what the university already knew about their background and found themselves repeatedly narrating the same personal circumstances to different staff and departments. This retelling could be distressing. Elaine, describing a scholarship application, explained: "I had to tell them so much… a lot of information for my circumstances to be recognised." Arya added, "You tell one person, then they send you to someone else… you end up saying the same painful stuff over and over." It was often the repetition, rather than the initial disclosure, that students found most burdensome. Nearly all participants advocated for a "tell us once" approach. They wanted their context recorded (with consent and appropriate privacy) so that they did not have to start from zero with each new lecturer or support service. Amelia described the relief this could bring: "If there's a file on me with a paragraph next to my name that someone could read… I wouldn't have to repeat my story every time." Having key information on record (for example, that a student is a carer, has refugee status, or experienced bereavement during their studies) could spare constant re-exposure and allow staff to respond with greater context from the outset.

Views on data sharing beyond a core support team varied. Some students were comfortable with their WP-related data being shared more widely "as long as they are doing something with it" (Khalilah), meaning they accepted broad awareness if it led to tangible support. Others wanted to "decide who knows and why" (Isra), especially given that academic tutors often doubled as pastoral advisors. For a few, university was intentionally treated as a fresh start, separate from a difficult past, and they were more cautious about having labels or history follow them. This ambivalence highlights a tension: students valued not having to self-disclose repeatedly, but they also wanted control over sensitive information. A single, blanket approach to data sharing risked undermining that sense of agency.

3.4.4 "Not Worse Off Enough": The Problem of Thresholds

Students were keenly aware of how WP support systems triaged need, and many became adept at navigating related processes. This awareness sometimes bred a new kind of self-doubt: discomfort over whether they were "disadvantaged enough" to warrant help. Some students with multiple overlapping "flags" (for example, being care-experienced, estranged, or financially independent) reported receiving high-quality, relational support and feeling validated by it. Arya, who benefited from a dedicated support programme for care leavers, said: "They actually check in on you… it feels like someone's looking out for you." Financial assistance in those cases was often described as life changing. Reflecting on a substantial bursary, Elaine confessed: "I've never had money before, and I'm unsure about spending it." By contrast, students who

felt they were "just below the line", with one or two less obvious risk factors, often reported receiving little or no proactive support despite significant challenges. Students also described the criteria for extra support (for example, particular postcodes, school markers, or formal labels such as "estranged") as opaque or arbitrary, which created confusion and sometimes resentment. This was especially true for those whose circumstances changed after enrolment. A student who became suddenly estranged from family partway through university might not have been flagged by admissions-based metrics yet could face severe challenges without automatic support. Some participants worried about a "race to the bottom", where only by accumulating the most hardship labels could one guarantee help. Several students who did not meet the highest-need thresholds described isolation despite their efforts: long hours spent commuting, concealed aspects of identity, and a feeling of having to "figure it all out alone" (Isra). Maisy used a striking metaphor, describing herself and others in this grey zone as "being in the trenches", working just as hard to stay afloat but without the recognition or support conferred on those officially deemed "WP enough." Collectively, these accounts challenge the assumption that only students in obvious crisis require help and suggest that strictly gatekept support systems risk overlooking students who are struggling in less visible ways.

3.4.5 Feeling "Seen and Heard"

Whether support achieved its intended impact depended on more than the existence of programmes; it hinged on how support was delivered and experienced. Across the dataset, students highlighted pockets of practice they experienced as timely, relational, and protective of their agency. One student praised an academic advisor: "She can actually give me support - I know if I email her that she will get back to me" (Tiffany). Another described a scholarship mentoring scheme that made her "feel held" (Arya) rather than scrutinised. These examples suggest that when support is personal, responsive and strengths-based, it can counteract alienation and build trust.

However, these experiences were the exception and often appeared to depend on individual staff or fortuitous circumstances. This "seen and heard" version of support was therefore uneven, contingent on specific mentors, special programmes, or chance encounters rather than guaranteed by default. Across the preceding themes, tone, format, and continuity mattered because they shaped whether a student felt recognised as a person or processed as a case. Without those elements, students could spend time and emotional energy explaining themselves repeatedly, leaving less for learning. The point is not that support is absent, but that poorly designed or poorly delivered support can add to students' burdens rather than alleviating them.

Together, these findings suggest that being "seen and heard" is not an added extra but a core equity condition. The report now turns to the Discussion to consider how everyday university mechanisms can produce the patterns identified across Themes 1–4.

4. Discussion

4.1 Mechanisms of Inequality

This discussion argues that inequalities in student experience are maintained, and often intensified, through three interlocking, co-dependent mechanisms: *Contact*, *Constraint* and *Chance*. These are not sequential stages of a linear process, but a dynamic set of pressures that ebb and flow across students' journeys and reinforce one another in practice. Each mechanism emerges from, and cuts across, the themes in the analysis (belonging, participation, confidence, recognition), yet none can be understood in isolation. Constraints raise the stakes of contact: when time, money, commuting, caring responsibilities, and administrative burden tighten the margins of daily life, the costs of asking for help increase. Selective or fraught contact, in turn, increases reliance on chance: students fall back on informal routes when formal engagement feels risky, culturally misaligned, or simply too hard to navigate. Uneven "lucky" outcomes then feed back into future constraints, as timely support and opportunity arrive for some and not others. Framed this way, inequality is reproduced not because support is wholly absent, but because access to support depends on crossing thresholds, sustaining effort under constraint, and, too often, getting lucky. This shifts attention from what students experience to how ordinary institutional processes produce patterned, unequal outcomes.

4.2 Contact

In the accounts we collected, *contact* was rarely a neutral first step. Students described not always knowing what a service or member of staff was "for," uncertainty about the etiquette of approaching academic staff, and worries about being judged, dismissed, or exposed, especially in situations where staff held academic authority (Ahn & Davis, 2019). This aligns with research showing that first-generation students are often less likely to interact with instructors and may delay or avoid academic help-seeking even when they need it, particularly when the norms of asking for help are implicit and the social stakes feel high (White & Canning, 2023). In this sense, contact operates as a hidden curriculum issue: institutions might assume that students know how to ask, when to ask, and what counts as an "appropriate" question, but those assumptions are unevenly met (Koutsouris *et al.*, 2021; Cotton *et al.*, 2013).

Initial interactions with the institution carry disproportionate weight. To seek help or clarification, a student must cross an interactional threshold that often requires not just knowing the formal procedure but feeling able to reveal uncertainties. That first contact can expose aspects of the student that they perceive as risky, for example, their accent or first language, their level of disciplinary fluency, or the fact they are struggling with something others seem to find easy. Such exposure carries identity implications. Because of this, many students (especially those from less traditional backgrounds in

HE) weigh the decision to approach someone carefully. Our data included examples of students “making themselves smaller” in classrooms or rehearsing questions, trying to gauge if it was safe to speak up. The implication for interpreting our findings is that inequalities in information, support and reassurance can emerge long before any formal support service is accessed. Where students are able to make timely, low-risk contact with staff, they gain earlier clarification, feedback, and course-corrections; where they cannot, they are more likely to manage problems alone, let misunderstandings fester, or rely on peers and guesswork.

Contact can also be understood as a form of presence with added value. It is not only about whether students know how to initiate interaction, but whether they are able to be present in ways that make such interaction possible: having sufficient time on campus, not having to opt out of sessions due to competing demands, and feeling able to turn up and participate. Where contact does occur, its value depends on the quality of the interaction. Being physically present but anonymous in a large lecture, or silent within a discussion, does not carry the same benefit as relational contact in which students are recognised, responded to, and supported. In this sense, contact is only meaningful when it generates connection, affirmation, and actionable guidance, rather than remaining passive or incidental.

Contact, then, is relational and symbolic rather than merely procedural. It is not enough that support exists behind an open office door or an email address; students must perceive it as accessible and intend to use it. When a student hesitates to approach a tutor, the result may be that two students sit in the same lecture with equal academic potential, but only one feels able to ask follow-up questions or request help—and that one will, over time, accumulate small advantages. The other student’s confusion may snowball because the path to resolve it felt too uncertain or risky. This resonates with the idea of a relationship-rich education: connections, especially those formed through routine teaching and advising interactions, are a core mechanism through which students access opportunities and develop a sense that they matter in the institution (Felten & Lambert, 2020). In practical terms, when contact is easy, safe, and encouraged, it can serve as an equaliser: students get support early, before small issues turn into big ones. But when contact is difficult or intimidating, it creates an invisible stratification: support and feedback flow readily to those who already feel at home in the system, while others remain on the fringe, technically present but without the same level of guidance. Recognising contact as an interactional threshold underscores why seemingly minor practices (like clearly explaining what office hours are for, explicitly inviting questions, or showing approachability) can have outsized effects on equity. These practices lower the threshold for everyone, which helps ensure that formal support services are not just available, but reachable and used by the full range of students.

However, contact with the institution was not always relied on. In our dataset, students referred to an amelioration of the demands of managing their circumstances through the passing of time. The quality, depth, and effectiveness of contact with the institution was outweighed by a slow build-up of self-belief, confidence, and friendships as their degree progressed. Indeed, students towards the end of their degree consistently remarked that time was the biggest factor in helping them navigate university life as a student from a WP background. Perhaps it is due to the lack of contact from the institution and uncertainty of how to navigate that, that students have learned to self-manage their circumstances, trusting that time will help establish effective routines and sources of support.

4.3 Constraint

Constraint refers to the unequal conditions under which students attempt to participate in university life: time poverty due to paid work, long commutes or caring responsibilities; the upfront costs embedded in study and placements; and the cumulative mental effort required to interpret expectations and navigate administrative processes. This connects to literature on unequal conditions of participation, which notes that financial pressure, employment hours and constrained time shape student engagement and attainment (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Callender, 2008; OfS, 2023). It also intersects with research on administrative burden, which conceptualises barriers to accessing services as comprising learning costs, compliance costs and psychological costs that can suppress take-up of support even when students are eligible and in need (Herd et al., 2023). In our data, this dynamic appeared in students' descriptions of having to "figure it out" on their own, being passed between departments or websites to find answers, or giving up on an opportunity when the process became too time-consuming or emotionally draining. Importantly, constraint is cumulative and system-produced, not just a one-off obstacle. Some students have far less margin for error or delay. A missed email or, an unclear instruction or tightly stacked deadlines might be inconvenient to a well-resourced student, but to a student at their limit, these can be decisive setbacks. Constraint emerges through the layering of ordinary barriers: complex forms, queues, narrow appointment windows, and requirements to repeatedly retell personal circumstances. Individually these may seem small, but when they stack up, they thin out participation, causing students to opt out of non-mandatory activities, delay help-seeking, or miss opportunities that require extra initiative.

Notably, these constraints do not disappear for students who are academically strong. High-achieving students from WP backgrounds may still be operating with little slack, meaning that strong performance can mask the underlying load until a disruption, such as illness, crisis, a timetable clash or a financial shock, reveals how little capacity they have to absorb additional demands. For such students, any targeted WP support offered by the institution has been conveyed as "patronising" and to be accepted on the

university's terms. Despite being well-intentioned, such support can carry an implicit assumption that students from WP backgrounds lack the academic, social, or cultural capital to navigate university independently and therefore need to be "fixed" in order to belong. This research engaged with students from WP backgrounds with high levels of self efficacy, who rejected imposter syndrome and were succeeding despite the structural constraints they were under. Rather than treating WP students as one homogenous group, acknowledgement for the capitals they bring with them would contribute to a more supportive and nuanced approach.

Such constraints are also experienced by mature students, compounded by a complete lack of recognition for their widening participation circumstances as a result of their age. With this follows the implicit assumption that mature students have the capacity to self-manage their circumstances, despite meeting the institution's widening participation criteria. In this context, age therefore serves as a further constraint.

Institutional habitus theory offers one explanation for why these barriers are not random but patterned. Universities often design their processes around an "ideal" student who has ample time, reliable technology, confidence in bureaucratic settings, and prior know-how about how university systems work (Thomas, 2002; Koutsouris *et al.*, 2021). Students who deviate from that ideal will find the system less accommodating. They encounter more hidden steps and have less buffer to absorb them. For example, accessing academic support may require noticing information, booking an appointment, completing a form, and attending during a narrow time window. A student who is juggling work and who is unsure what help is appropriate may never reach the point of receiving support. By contrast, a student with fewer constraints may complete these steps quickly and receive help, barely noticing the hurdles involved. In this way, constraint operates as a hidden filter. It rarely bars students through a single dramatic policy; rather, it wears them down through repeated, mundane hurdles. Those with plentiful time, resources and know-how navigate the hurdles, while those with tighter resources accumulate delay and stress at each hurdle. Over time, the difference in participation can become stark. Students who have to work long hours or worry about money tend to participate less in extracurriculars, have fewer interactions with staff, and report feeling less integrated into university life (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; OfS, 2023). In short, constraint as a mechanism highlights that "equal" provision on paper can reinforce inequality if it demands more time, knowledge, and emotional energy than some students can spare.

4.4 Chance

Chance becomes a critical factor when contact is limited and constraints are high. When students are unsure how to ask for help, do not feel safe disclosing need, or cannot spare the time and energy to navigate formal routes, they often rely on informal,

ad hoc pathways. This might mean overhearing a useful piece of information in class, meeting a peer who has been through a similar situation, or encountering a staff member who takes an interest. Participants recounted such “lucky breaks”: being in the right place at the right time to learn about a funding opportunity, or a chance conversation that led to academic reassurance. These moments can be transformative, yet they are unreliable and inequitably distributed. “Luck” tends to favour those who have more campus presence, stronger peer networks, and greater confidence. This aligns with research on commuter students and students with extensive off-campus commitments, which shows that limited time on campus and weaker integration into campus social life mean fewer opportunities for informal learning or spontaneous support (Pokorny et al., 2016; Thomas & Jones, 2017) For commuter students, feeling that they matter may be just as important as feeling that they belong (Hallam, 2023; Turner et al., 2024). When that sense of mattering develops mainly through interaction, students who have fewer opportunities for such encounters are placed at a disadvantage.

From a social capital perspective, the role of chance in accessing support can be understood through unequal access to weak ties (Granovetter, 1973). These are casual acquaintances and loose connections through which useful information and opportunities often travel. Students who connect with more people across the institution tend to accumulate more incidental knowledge: they hear about internship openings, get tips about which staff are helpful, and learn unwritten rules. Students who do not have those networks, perhaps because they live at home, leave campus quickly, or feel like outsiders, are left out of this informal information economy. In our findings, chance was visible in the contrasts students drew. Some could point to a key moment when things “clicked” because of an unplanned but positive encounter. Others expressed frustration that if they had not asked at just the right time, they would never have known about an opportunity, or they never did find out. Particularly for commuters and working students, the odds of being present for these encounters are lower, leading to a more partial presence on campus. The result is that opportunity can appear open to all yet still be unevenly accessed. Disguised as luck, participation in the multifaceted areas of university life is in fact unevenly distributed and patterned by structural inequalities.

Chance as a mechanism does not imply that staff are uncaring or that support is absent. In several accounts, students benefited from extremely dedicated staff, but those benefits reached students unevenly—only those assigned to a particular tutor, those who happened to seek them out, or those present at key moments. Although perceived by students as moments of serendipity, such examples reveal significant structural barriers. Indeed, these accounts suggest that opportunity is dependent on fortuitous encounters and interactions rather than being embedded in systematic, formal structures.

Similarly, targeted programmes supported some high-need groups, while students with fewer "flags" sometimes received standard, impersonal treatment unless they encountered an unofficial mentor or informally advocated for themselves. This produces a perverse distribution of "luck": students with multiple formal indicators of disadvantage can sometimes be in a stronger position because eligibility unlocks proactive, relational support. On the contrary, students on the periphery of need may struggle significantly but fall below thresholds and therefore depend more heavily on informal networks and serendipity. In effect, the system often worked best for two kinds of students: the most advantaged (who navigate it easily) and those whose circumstances triggered formal support. Whilst this highlights that the current model is effective for a minority of students, it does not operate effectively at scale. The consequences of such an approach are echoed in several students' hesitancy to ask for help based on the belief that they are undeserving of support for not being in a 'WP crisis'. Students who are in between could fall through the cracks, relying on neither fully empowered navigational skills nor institutional targeting. This points to a design risk: where vital information is typically acquired through word of mouth, and where connection depends on informal networks, institutions can end up relying on serendipity to "do the sorting".

4.5 Interplay

Taken together, these mechanisms help explain why apparently small differences in student experience can compound over time into larger inequalities. Constraint raises the cost of contacting support; that increases the likelihood that students who are struggling will wait, withdraw, or rely on informal workarounds instead of seeking help through official channels. When students limit their contact or stay "under the radar" due to discomfort or time pressure, it elevates the role of chance in their outcomes, because support may only arrive if they stumble upon it. When support or opportunities reach students only by chance, those who miss out are left with their constraints unresolved, which can intensify the cycle. This compounding dynamic aligns with engagement models that locate student experience at the intersection of structural conditions and relational or pedagogic encounters (Kahu & Nelson, 2017). It also echoes research on procedural justice in education, which suggests that when students feel fairly treated, heard, and included, trust in and identification with the institution are strengthened, with positive effects on engagement and wellbeing. By contrast, perceived unfairness can erode commitment and increase burnout (Główczewski & Burdziej, 2023). In the analysis presented earlier, these dynamics were visible in everyday situations: holding back in seminars, missing peer study networks because of commuting, delaying help-seeking until a situation becomes urgent, or struggling with repeated retelling across teams. Thinking in terms of contact, constraint and chance therefore keeps attention on process rather than blaming individuals. It shifts the

question from whether a student asked for help to what made help-seeking risky or costly in the first place.

By naming contact, constraint, and chance and examining their interplay, we make visible the hidden architecture of inequality in student experiences. The mechanisms are not separate stories but one integrated system: each can amplify or temper the others. For instance, if the contact threshold is lowered through a culture that normalises help-seeking and responsive staff-student relationships, there is likely to be less dependence on luck and a reduction in the impact of constraints. Conversely, if constraints intensify, through rising costs of living for example, then even excellent contact initiatives may not prevent inequitable outcomes, because some students cannot take advantage of what is offered. This interplay reinforces that equity work in HE needs to be joined-up. Efforts that focus only on adding programmes will not achieve their potential if students do not engage because of contact barriers or time and financial constraints. Likewise, approaches that urge individuals to be more resilient may falter if they ignore the structural constraints and the fact that proactive help-seeking carries different risks for different students.

4.6 Conclusion

Contact, Constraint and Chance provide a way of naming what students described across interviews and focus groups: that participation is shaped by how safe it feels to approach others, how much time and energy daily life permits, and how often opportunity depends on informal networks and being present at the right moment. This framing supports a shift away from individualised explanations of success or failure and towards the ordinary design features of university life, the communication practices, support pathways, and everyday expectations, that make up students' conditions of engagement (Thomas, 2002; Koutsouris et al., 2021). It emphasises that when we talk about unequal outcomes, we should look at how normal operations can still privilege some students via hidden barriers or unwritten rules. The argument complements relationship-rich education in treating connection as core infrastructure for student success, particularly for those without inherited insider knowledge of how to navigate academia (Felten & Lambert, 2020). It also resonates with administrative burden research, which highlights how learning, compliance and psychological costs can shape whether support is reached and used (Herd et al., 2023). Finally, it reinforces that widening participation cannot end at admissions: inequalities continue to be produced after entry through the day-to-day processes that determine who is noticed, who is supported in a timely way, and who is left to cope alone.

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Appendix A – Comment Bank

Theme 1: People Like Us

Differences in wealth

- "For placements for example, for medicine you get sent to different places which has to be out of your own pocket and is split between Manchester and Salford. Someone I know, her parents have just bought her an apartment in Salford and Manchester." (Khalilah)
- "You see pictures on Instagram of them sitting on their yacht whilst I'm at Tesco stacking shelves." (Daisy)
- "In a business unit I took, we were talking about volunteering in a care home and [a student] said, why would anyone volunteer unpaid? It's as if it's beneath them." (Sophie)
- "You can tell by how they talk, the way they carry themselves. It's like they are a level above everyone else... my friend's parents, they're not millionaires, they're billionaires." (Joel)
- "They tend to gravitate towards each other…I had someone ask me what Student Finance was." (Salma)
- "I notice people say that their parents pay their rent or they don't have a job…I'm not working because I want to, I'm doing it out of necessity." (Thomas)
- "There are people who have been on ten holidays this year already, but I've been on three holidays in my whole lifetime. There is an undertone to the whole conversation of difference." (Charlotte)

Academic differences

- "I don't know how to write academically, and I just thought everyone was the same but for some people who are more privileged they know because that's how they speak." (Isra)
- "I haven't really given my opinions much in the seminars... I'm from Salford, I don't speak very posh, so they look down on me; it's like people were almost laughing at me." (Daisy)
- "Now that I'm here, it's hard because you know that people in your lectures did get the top grades and then you kind of feel stupid because you know that you haven't. I feel like there is a gap between the levels of education." (Daisy)
- "Once I arrived, I felt like I was put in the baseline with everyone else." (Phoebe)
- "People like us are somehow punished because it's expected that once we get to university, we should already know things we were never taught. We have to put in extra work just to stand on the same ground." (Khalilah)

- “People I know who have parents who went to uni have more confidence, they speak more in lectures, they take up a lot of the conversation in smaller classes at least. It can be really intimidating." (Amelia)

Social differences

- “I can relate to people from all backgrounds whereas these people are so rich and don’t function in the same way in society.” (Khalilah)
- “Charisma, the way they talk, the way they carry themselves. It’s like they are a level above everyone else. They are almost untouchable.”(Joel)
- “I’m a northerner from Bolton…they talk about all this volunteering and I think, that’s good – you can afford to have all this free time. We aren’t the same.”(Daisy)
- "We’re in the same place, we’re both at the University of Manchester, but our lives are worlds apart. I can’t just travel after uni, I have to fight for every step. That difference makes me prouder of how hard I’ve worked to get here." (Karabo)
- “I feel like there is a bias in accents…a lot of people speak clearly and use posh terminology, you can just tell they are from privately educated schools.”(Daisy)
- “Hearing people from the South…I remember coming to uni and thinking, we’re not in Bolton anymore.” (Daisy)
- “If you tell someone your grades and that you got a contextual offer and the area you’re from, they look at you and nod. They then tell you about extra-curricular things and summer schools they have done and there feels like a real divide.” (Emma)
- “For me personally it’s the age difference. I am sure they have their own issues and circumstances at home but because I am old enough to be their Mum, I have to function as a parent so how can they possibly relate to me?” (Becky)

Theme 2: The Price of Participation

Financial pressures

- “For our course, we do six weeks of placement… it’s costing you money to go, which is reimbursed, but if you don’t have that money in your account at the time it’s incredibly stressful, and you’re losing those six weeks where you can’t work.” (Penny)
- “It takes a while to get reimbursed…it’s especially difficult on placement because you have to spend money to travel and you can’t work at the same time.” (Karima)
- “For our placements you might need three buses or a tram…even just paying for a bus pass is an additional cost.” (Salma)
- “You have less time to do the social things so then you feel more socially deprived.” (Daisy)
- “The time that I spend working at the back of my mind I’m thinking that this is time I could be using to study which would improve my grade.” (Makena)
- “There was an access to work programme, which I thought was about widening participation, but they said it is an unpaid internship. I spent two hours researching for it, but I can’t afford the rent and costs. It sets you back because I think well then what can I actually do?” (Sharon)
- “I fully gave up on an aspiration of mine to be a clinical psychologist as that requires a lot of experience which is often through unpaid internships and I’m not going to be able to do that as someone from low-income. It’s disheartening knowing that certain career paths seem to be for the rich or the elite.” (Habibah)
- "I grew up being homeless. For me, getting a degree wasn’t just about education—it was about survival. I knew if I didn’t make it here, nothing would change." (Madison)
- "I’m walking down Oxford Road at 5 a.m. and students are coming back from their night out… It’s strange seeing them intoxicated and I’m walking to work, probably to pick up their online shopping delivery.” (Maisy)

Lack of connections

- “I feel like people who are richer have rich parents and have rich connections so kind of sail through uni and get a really good job. It’s a systematic issue where we can’t actually get the things that we need.” (Khalilah)
- “I think for us on our degree where some of it is about professionalism, my Mum works in a warehouse, so I found that the level of professional conversation was quite a steep learning curve...it can be difficult to try to figure out how you’re supposed to interact in those kinds of scenarios.” (Penny)
- “My parents didn’t go to university so they wouldn’t know. You just feel like you’re on your own.” (Isra)

- "They always have back up, someone to go to. If something goes wrong, they've got parents who can step in, pay for things, make calls, open doors. For us, if something goes wrong, we just have to figure it out ourselves." (Elaine)
- “You can tell when someone has generations in the profession – they can go home and practise with Mum and Dad. I can't do that.” (Khalilah)
- “I feel like I've had to make a conscious effort to make connections, otherwise you could just float through the university. Last year I met people by chance.” (Shantelle)

Theme 3: Getting in and Getting on

Academic advisors

- “My academic advisor has changed every year... it’s jarring, you don’t have that bond, so I’m less likely to go to them.” (Habibah)
- “My advisor in second year sometimes said things that were tone deaf such as telling me about lots of unpaid roles, so it starts really with educating the staff.” (Habibah)
- “My academic advisor is my course director. I have a bit of fear because I don’t want it to impact on any sort of academic reputation of me by going to her, so there is a bit of pressure to go to her as my best self.” (Emily)
- “Maybe the advisors could have particular widening participation students as group meetings too so that could then be a nice way to make friends.” (Habibah)
- “I have an academic advisor but he doesn’t act as one, I’ve been figuring it out myself. If I did have a problem I wouldn’t go to him, he doesn’t portray himself as my advisor.” (Emma)

Admissions processes

- “I didn’t want the contextual offer. I didn’t like the idea that I got in because I’m from a disadvantaged background because I knew I could get in without it. It’s just like, I don’t like the idea that people think I only got in because of my background.” (Mei)
- “Getting a contextual offer, people might think well you got in only because you got a contextual offer whereas my peers all got A*. It makes you feel like you don’t belong.” (Omar)
- “[With contextual offers], it gives the university an advantage to say we’re helping these poor kids get into uni.” (Isra)
- “My application was flagged – not really told why…maybe postcode or first-gen." (Thomas)
- “I qualify for everything, but I am from London so I can’t apply – I've never understood why that is.” (Penelope)
- “The bursary scheme deadline ended before I even had an actual offer from Manchester to study here.” (Makena)
- “I think contextual offers are a good thing because there is a reason why it’s harder for me.” (Charlotte)

Support mechanisms

- “I’ve never really seen those people who talk about [widening participation] at any of the events…they don’t have that same energy in a student-facing role. There is definitely a level of they feel like they are doing us a favour.” (Isra)

- “Sometimes I think well do they perceive us as beneath them or as someone they pity?” (Sharon)
- “When I want access to more resources I feel like I am asking for a favour.” (Sharon)
- “I wish there was an intervention like we had at secondary school where I could just come in and maybe talk about ways that we could improve our grades and anything else that you might have an issue with. But we don’t do that at uni.” (Karabo)
- “ I feel like I’ve struggled to make friends from the same background as me so I would have appreciated having a group of people I could talk to who I know have similar experiences.” (Daisy)
- “I’m caring for my Mum whose rent has gone up…I’m applying for the Cost-of-Living Fund but even then there is no guarantee.” (Joel)
- “If you spend more than £90 they will reimburse you…but realistically nobody is going to.” (Makena)
- “At university, they tell you where to get support but you have to get it yourself…you have to speak to different people for different things.” (Madison)
- “There a lot of admin…emailing one person after another just to ask a simple question.” (Isra)
- “There was nothing to help you settle in, no structure, everyone did what they wanted to. I found that a bit jarring. From the open days I got the impression there was a lot of help but actually it wasn’t like that at all, I felt like I had to guess a lot of it.” (Emma)
- “I think staff assume you know a lot of things but I don’t know about online platforms. I didn’t know about Canvas or where to get slides and materials from for about two weeks. When I made a friend, they explained everything to me.” (Hiba)
- “[Targeted support] would have made a world of different in terms of my confidence. Even if I didn’t need it, it would be good to know it’s there. Instead, I have just figured it out by myself.” (Amelia)
- “I am from a military family. It feels like I’m part of a forgotten group of people. I’m so used to there being no support in place.” (Isla)

Theme 4: Feeling Seen and Heard

Language and labelling

- “I find it empowering to reclaim the term WP — I own it and I take pride in it; it pushes me to work harder.” (Khalilah)
- “If I say I’m from a disadvantaged background, they look at you with pity…it tries to help but can come across as patronising.” (Khalilah)
- “Tone matters more than the words – it's the way it’s presented that makes me feel comfortable or not.” (Sophie)
- “I don’t think any language around being disadvantaged is offensive – I’ve never felt that, simply because it’s a fact. Compared to the majority of people, I am disadvantaged in many different ways. I’ve come from a disadvantaged background, it’s a matter of fact, and it’s just a fact that I’ve had to come to face.” (Joel)
- “It’s less about being disadvantaged and from socioeconomic deprivation because I think those terms are strong. I think the term widening participation is a good one. It shows that we’re trying to get more people into university.” (Habibah)
- “Part of me had a negative reaction to widening participation because part of me associated it with charity. I think it gives the implication that I didn’t earn my place here based on my own merit.” (Jonathon)

Inequality and belonging in university life

- “I am an asylum seeker. I haven’t told anyone about my status here because I feel like I will be judged for it. I think they will think I am not deserving to be here.” (Hiba)
- “I do feel quite left out because of my accent and I don’t know what the uni can do about that other than constantly encouraging people like me to do well and challenge the system.” (Joel)
- “I found it quite difficult to approach lecturers, thinking that everybody already knew how to do these things and I felt too embarrassed to ask.” (Alara)
- “I find it hard to write in an academic way because I don’t know how to write academically and I just thought everyone was the same but for some people who are more privileged they know because that’s how they speak.” (Isra)
- “When you have support programmes happening for you and others don’t, I feel a bit alienated because of clashes with things because they don’t have the extra responsibilities that I have (e.g. intervention / appointments / mentoring).” (Emily)
- “I think it’s quite difficult to be in a degree like medicine and from a WP background because you are surrounded by rich people.” (Khalilah)

- “It would make me feel more “other” by attending WP specific sessions.” (Khalilah)
- “I felt it in first year as I was the only Black person in my group and everyone else had been to private school and they were throwing out lots of medical terms – remember this was only first year and nobody knows anything, but it seemed like they already knew a lot.” (Madison)
- “I feel like I’m lagging behind because I’ve come from a very different background.” (Phoebe)

Structural barriers and access to support

- “You spend half an hour writing why you are deserving of something. It can be psychologically draining.” (Thomas)
- “I wouldn’t mind information being shared as long as they ask my permission – I want that basic ask before referrals.” (Georgia)
- “I think I sometimes see the widening participation efforts as tokenistic of we have all of these students we need to get them in to hit our access and participation targets and then how we get them to succeed, well, we’ll leave that to other people around the university.” (Jasmine)
- “I don’t think the bursaries really cover that. I don’t think they realise how much students struggle.” (Joel)
- “In first year I had an experience with my academic advisor who, rather than helping me, made a comment about my age and that perhaps I should drop out, or have 6 months off then come back.” (Alara)
- “I’ve had an experience where I was referred to occupational health and then without my permission, the clinical lead in that area then shared the information with my practice educator. I had no say in that and it felt wrong because that’s my information. I just want that basic ask.” (Georgia)
- “The internship I got was done through my own research and not all of us can afford to do an unpaid internship in London for example. They do offer things though for example the work experience bursary but they should make one specifically for widening participation students.” (Habibah)
- “I think it poses the question of up until what point are you willing to support me? Because it’s like I need a certain amount of money to be able to get a particular experience so are you going to be able to give me a bursary for that?” (Makena)

Appendix B – Participant Data

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Year
Emily	19	Female	1
Chloe	21	Female	3
Malala	20	Female	2
Jeanette	22	Female	1
Farah	20	Female	3
Penny	23	Female	2
Holly	22	Female	3
Alara	22	Female	2
Philippa	19	Female	1
Sharon	19	Female	2
Mei	20	Female	2
Aaliyah	22	Female	4
Zara	20	Female	3
Melissa	20	Female	2
Habibah	21	Female	3
Karima	19	Female	1
Grace	18	Female	1
Imogen	25	Female	4
Cristina	24	Female	2
Laila	21	Female	3
Makena	21	Female	2
Karabo	21	Female	3
Madison	22	Female	3
Isra	20	Female	1
Athena	20	Female	1

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Year
Georgia	21	Female	2
Penelope	20	Female	2
Aida	20	Female	3
Omar	20	Male	2
Arya	21	Female	3
Sophie	20	Female	3
Darius	22	Female	4
Phoebe	18	Female	1
Salma	21	Female	2
Thomas	21	Male	3
Daisy	18	Female	1
Joel	20	Male	2
Khalilah	21	Female	1
Jasmine	22	Female	4
Maisy	20	Female	3
Rana	20	Female	3
Emma	18	Female	1
Hiba	20	Female	1
Charlotte	19	Female	2
Elaine	18	Female	1
Amelia	20	Female	3
Jonathon	25	Male	2
Shantelle	22	Female	1
Isla	20	Female	3
Becky	40	Female	2