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The University of Manchester
Institute of Teaching and Learning

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**CONTACT, CONSTRAINT,
AND CHANCE:
UNDERSTANDING
INEQUALITY IN HIGHER
EDUCATION. STUDENT
EXPERIENCE OF PROCESS,
FAIRNESS, AND TARGETED
SUPPORT**

ITL FELLOWSHIP 2024-26

**PROJECT
REPORT**

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"We're in the same place, we're both at the University of Manchester, but our lives are worlds apart. I have to fight for every step. That difference makes me prouder of how hard I've worked to get here."

Karabo

ITL Fellow 2024-26

ADAM COOKE SFHEA



Adam is a Teaching and Learning Officer in the University of Manchester Library, specialising in access and success initiatives. He brings over a decade of teaching experience in secondary education and now leads the Library's work on widening participation and social responsibility. Adam holds an MA in Educational Leadership from the University of Manchester and is passionate about how education can address social inequality. His

scholarship interests focus on widening access for students and educators and promoting research-informed, socially just practices in higher education.

Student Partner 2024-26

RACHAEL HOWE FHEA



Rachael is a member of the University's Library Student Team and has recently completed an MA in Linguistics. She also holds an MSc from Oxford and an MLang from Southampton, also within the field of languages and linguistics, and will soon be starting a PhD. Rachael is particularly interested in exploring different pedagogical approaches to language teaching as well as academic and pastoral interventions to create an inclusive, supportive learning environment in which every student feels that they belong.

Context and objectives

Across higher education, there is a sustained emphasis on closing awarding gaps and ensuring equitable outcomes for students from underrepresented backgrounds (Mountford-Zimdars & Moore, 2020; Andrews et al., 2023). At the University of Manchester, this commitment to closing awarding gaps and ensuring equitable outcomes for students is embedded in the [Access and Participation Plan \(APP\)](#). The [Manchester 2035](#) vision sets out the University's ambition to embed belonging, mattering and success throughout the student lifecycle and to prioritise reducing disparities in access, success, and progression.

This project responds to two sector-wide trends shaping institutional practice:

- **A call for evidence-based interventions that extend beyond entry metrics.** Recent scholarship highlights that widening participation work must move past admissions and address structural and cultural barriers throughout the student lifecycle (Stevenson et al, 2010; Thomas, 2020, Universities UK & National Union of Students, 2019). Increasingly, interventions are expected to be co-created with students rather than imposed upon them.
- **An ambition to embed belonging, mattering, and success across higher education.** Research consistently links students' sense of belonging to retention, attainment, and wellbeing (Meehan & Howells, 2018; Gilani and Thomas, 2025; Jones and Bell, 2025). Manchester's strategic priorities echo this sector-wide focus on relational and inclusive practices.

While targeted initiatives have proliferated, several hundred are identified in the most recent APP, these often operate to students rather than *with* them.

This research aimed to act as a counterweight to top-down approaches by capturing what it feels like to be on the receiving end of such interventions. By centring student voice through a series of focus groups, this qualitative study explores how structural and cultural conditions shape the journey through higher education for students from widening participation (WP) backgrounds.

Earlier work informed this project. During the pandemic, the *Library Peer Network* (Blake et al, 2023), a targeted initiative supporting WP students, surfaced tensions around labelling and communication. Students were often unaware of WP classifications, and few were asked how it felt to be identified in this way. Well-intentioned targeted interventions were having unintended consequences, raising questions about equity, fairness, and the dignity of support processes. These concerns echo findings in the wider literature: Jones (2017) highlights how transition gaps, mismatches between students' expectations and experiences, can exacerbate feelings of estrangement and contribute to later outcome differentials. For WP students, these gaps often relate to pedagogy and institutional culture, where implicit norms privilege some learners over others (Reay et al, 2013; Burke, 2012). This project builds on those insights by exploring how language, data use, and support mechanisms shape WP students' sense of belonging and mattering in higher education.

For the purposes of this study, WP students are defined according to the University of Manchester's criteria. However, there are recognised tensions surrounding the term widening participation and how appropriate this language feels to students, who were often unaware of their 'WP' classifications, which subsequently became a focus point in the research questions.

Activities

Research Design and Ethical Foundations

The study was underpinned by full ethical approval and a commitment to co-creation. Focus group prompts were developed collaboratively with Student Partners to ensure sensitivity and authenticity, avoiding tokenistic engagement. This design choice reflects sector calls for participatory approaches in widening participation research (Taylor and Bovill, 2017; Negrea and Gartland, 2025).

Recruitment and Sampling

Recruitment aimed for diversity across disciplines, commuting patterns, and WP markers, including first-generation status, low-income background, and care experience. Calls for participants were disseminated through staff teaching, learning networks and student hubs, generating significant interest. Participants self-identified and received vouchers in recognition of their time. Purposive sampling was adopted to foreground voices often absent from generic feedback channels. While self-selection introduces limitations, it was necessary to access lived experiences of structural barriers and co-create solutions grounded in student realities.

Focus Group Structure

Four focus groups were organised around three thematic lenses aligned with the research questions:

- **Language** – How do students wish to be referred to in WP initiatives, and what sensitivities should staff consider?
- **People and Place** – Where and from whom do students want support and interventions to be offered?
- **Data and Ethics** – What are students' expectations of how WP data is accessed and used?

This structure enabled nuanced discussion of identity, belonging, and institutional processes, moving beyond surface-level satisfaction metrics.

Analysis and Theme Development

The transcripts and notes were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021), enabling an iterative approach to data engagement and collaborative coding throughout the process. Immersion in the data revealed a complexity, surfacing patterns around belonging, barriers, and the ethics of support. Themes were refined through peer debriefing and triangulation with Student Partner insights to enhance credibility.

Research Design and Participant Recruitment

After ethical approval was gained, recruitment aimed for diversity across disciplines, commuting patterns, and WP markers (including first-generation students, low-income backgrounds, and care-experienced students). Dissemination of the call for students through staff teaching and learning networks and student hub generated significant interest. Participants self-identified and were offered vouchers in recognition of their time. Purposive sampling was adopted by inviting students with protected characteristics to participate in the study, meaning that students are likely to have self-selected because of their personal experiences and background. However, this approach was necessary for the purposes of the present study's focus and to explore challenges or barriers they have faced to then discuss solutions for meaningful change to occur.

The focus groups were structured around three key themes:

- **Language** – How do students wish to be referred to in WP initiatives, and what sensitivities should staff be aware of?
- **People and Place** – Where and from whom do students want support and interventions to be offered?
- **Data and Ethics** – What are students' understandings and expectations of how their WP data is accessed and used?

Thematic Analysis and Theme Development

Using reflexive thematic analysis, we coded and developed themes collaboratively. This stage was challenging, immersing ourselves in the data revealed more complexity than anticipated but it was also the most rewarding, allowing us to surface patterns that speak to belonging, barriers, and the ethics of support.

Challenges faced

Being more comfortable in the classroom than as a researcher, I moved from being on the front line of teaching to navigating the nuances of file management systems, data management plans, and research ethics. As has been documented in other Fellowships reports, securing ethical approval was a significant challenge particularly as an 'outsider' to academic research.

My position in the University Library and my work on access and success initiatives meant I was immersed in students' stories and had strong anecdotal evidence of the challenges they faced. Distancing myself from inevitable bias and resisting the temptation to turn this into a personal crusade to dismantle educational inequality, was difficult during data collection and analysis. What I heard often made me want to cry, shout, and bang down doors on students' behalf in equal measure. However, it was essential not to centre myself in this work, but instead to ensure the research amplified student voices in a way that could influence institutional practice.

Another challenge was the assumption that I could easily access the students I needed. I imagined this would be a continuation of the daily conversations I had through student partnership work, formalised into a neat report. The duality of being both practitioner and researcher meant these worlds had to remain distinct for ethical reasons. I felt I knew who these students were, but

I had to allow them to come forward. Students had to self-identify as coming from a WP background, which felt frustrating when I knew the University held datasets that could identify these students.

Language was another complexity. The project aimed to critically examine the terminology of 'widening participation', yet we had to use this language to frame the research. We worked hard to be sensitive and empathetic but asking questions about identity and inclusion in a way that was both critical and respectful was challenging. There were moments of awkward phrasing, finger quotes, and apologies as we navigated a deeply personal and politically charged topic.

Student partnership

Student partnership played a pivotal role in every stage of the project. Rachael contributed to the design of focus group schedules, helped refine language to ensure sensitivity and clarity, and co-facilitated sessions to create a safe and inclusive environment for participants. Her presence as a peer was invaluable in encouraging open dialogue and authentic contributions amongst students - something that would have been harder to achieve had the sessions been led solely by myself.

Beyond facilitation, Rachael took the lead on transcription and initial coding of qualitative data, offering a fresh and nuanced perspective to thematic analysis. Rachael's live notes during the focus groups were one of the most valuable documents we had that offered a unique richness to the data and were collated so skilfully. The partnership model also provided mutual benefits. For the Student Partner, the project offered hands-on experience in qualitative research, ethics, and reflexive analysis, skills that will serve as a strong foundation for future academic work. For me, it was a reminder of the

transformative potential of co-creation: working alongside students not as subjects of research but as equal contributors to knowledge production.

This Fellowship has reinforced my commitment to embedding student partnership in all aspects of access and success work. Meaningful change cannot happen without students shaping the agenda. It was only through the professionalism and creativity of Rachael that we were able to make significant progress. Their contribution was invaluable, and I am deeply grateful for their insight and collaboration. Watching their academic careers flourish will be one of the most rewarding outcomes of this Fellowship.

Collaborative work

his project would not have been possible without the support and generosity of colleagues across the University and beyond.

- **Jennie Blake** provided unconditional support as both line manager and advocate. Her ability to open doors and create spaces for innovation has shaped how I navigate the University. Jennie's commitment to fighting for students continues to shape my work.
- **Judy Williams** signed off on the project and took a chance on my ideas, seeing potential in an approach that was new to me and to the Library.
- **Katy Woolfenden** continues to advocate for the Library Student Team to thrive and championing our work on access and success.
- The **Teaching Excellence team**—particularly **Lisa McDonagh**, **Emma Sanders**, and **Holly Dewsnip**—provided constant encouragement and practical support. Their guidance ensured this project moved from the “ideas pile” to reality.

- The **Fellowship network** has been a supportive community throughout. I am especially grateful to my critical friends, **Alison Harvey** and **Chris Sutton**, for their time, encouragement, and invaluable insights.
 - Finally, the [CATE award winning Library Student Team](#) has been a driving force behind this work. Their lived experiences shaped the foundations of the project. While too numerous to mention individually, I would like to thank **Iqra Malik** and **Lily Pearson** for their encouragement at times when the spinning plates felt close to crashing.
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Outputs

The project has generated a range of outputs, with some work still in progress:

Full Report

The complete findings have been compiled into a detailed report, see [Contact, Constraint and Chance: Understanding Inequality in Higher Education. Student Experiences of Process, Fairness and Targeted Support \(2026\)](#). A summary of key findings and recommendations is included below.

Teaching and Scholarship Network

The project was showcased as an exemplar of Fellowship research at the **Teaching and Scholarship Network** (October 2025, see [the University's Supporting your Scholarship toolkit](#)) and is hosted on their website as a resource for navigating ethical approval processes.

Conference Dissemination

Findings have been submitted, or are scheduled for submission, to sector-leading conferences, including:

- **Advance HE Teaching and Learning Conference 2026**
- **RAISE Conference 2026**

Blog and Institutional Sharing

- A [Teaching Excellence Awards \(TEA\) Blog](#) is in development and scheduled for publication in Summer 2026.
- In addition, an **Institute of Teaching and Learning (ITL) session** is planned to share insights and recommendations with colleagues across the University in 2026.

Future Publications

We aim to develop a reflective article for submission to a student engagement or widening participation journal, building on the thematic analysis and recommendations from this study.

Summary findings

The findings presented here distil the voices of widening participation (WP) students into four organising themes that reveal the everyday mechanics of inclusion and exclusion at Manchester. These are not abstract ideas; they are grounded in lived experience. How difference is felt in seminar rooms, how costs quietly ration opportunity, how institutional signals shape trust, and how language determines whether support feels dignified or patronising. Together, these themes offer a lens on what it means to belong in a research-intensive university, and they point to practical levers for change that align with Manchester's Access and Participation Plan and Manchester 2035 vision.

“People Like Us”: Identity, Class, and Belonging

Students experience university as a space where social and cultural markers such as accent, confidence, and networks signal who belongs. This embodied sense of “people like us” versus “people like them” shapes participation and risk-taking.

Students describe a persistent sense of difference from peers who appear more confident, well-connected, and financially secure. This difference is visible in everyday markers such as accent, clothing, confidence, and familiarity with academic norms, and it shapes participation: who speaks, who holds back, and how safe it feels to risk being wrong. Some students notice peers who “carry themselves differently,” supported by family resources and networks that provide a safety net. In contrast, many WP students experience university as high stakes, where mistakes carry personal cost and support is limited, creating constant vigilance and fatigue. These comparisons are relational (“people like them” vs “people like us”), embodied (voice, dress, manner), and shaped by context (discipline norms, contextual offers, commuter status). They appear in seminars, corridor conversations about internships, and moments where regional accent or first-generation status become social markers. This is not just perception; it is a practical reality that influences confidence and participation. While difference can motivate as well as isolate, pride in independence often coexists with code-switching or withdrawal. The challenge is not to change students but to create environments where diverse ways of speaking and participating are recognised and valued.

Illustrative Quotes

“You can tell by how they talk, the way they carry themselves. It’s like they are a level above everyone else. They are almost untouchable, they’ve had more experiences and have been able to do more. People on the opposite spectrum

who are disadvantageded are a lot more reserved my friend's parents, they're not millionaires, they're billionaires. That's one of the most insane things I've ever heard in my life"

Joel

"I almost feel quite stupid and that my opinion isn't as valued as much as people who have been privately educated. 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

The Price of Participation

Structural scarcity of money and time creates tangible limits on engagement. Placements, volunteering, and enrichment often assume resources WP students simply do not have.

Students describe clear, recurring constraints that limit their ability to take part in opportunities, even when motivation is high. The main issue is structural scarcity - the combined effect of limited money, time, and policy gaps. For many, part-time work is essential, not optional, creating time poverty through missed lectures and constant juggling of shifts. Placements often mean weeks without pay, and hidden costs such as travel, professional clothing, and qualification fees add further pressure. These factors quietly ration access to placements, societies, and employability activities. Some career paths feel "for the rich" because they rely on unpaid internships or London-based interviews that assume spare cash and family support. Students also highlight volunteering as a contradiction: for some it signals cultural capital, for others it is simply unaffordable. These pressures are not exceptional; they are routine conditions shaping who can apply, attend, and persist. Institutions can act by publishing costs and timelines early, lowering

reimbursement thresholds, creating paid micro-roles, and aligning timetables with work realities. Addressing these barriers is not about building resilience but about redesigning systems so that standard opportunities are genuinely accessible to students living ordinary WP realities.

Illustrative Quotes

“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

“My childhood was very chaotic; I grew up being homeless. I realised early on, especially in sixth form, if I did well I could have somewhere to stay at university, I could have a roof over my head. I knew if I didn’t make it here, if I don’t get a degree, then nothing will change and it could spiral.”

Madison

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

Institutional processes send mixed messages about fairness and support. Students want targeting and flagging to translate into timely, transparent, discipline-relevant action.

Students pay close attention to institutional signals – who is flagged, what support is offered, and when. “Getting in” relates to contextual offers, flagging criteria, and [MAP eligibility](#); “getting on” concerns post-entry parity, advisor continuity, being passed around internal systems, and clarity about who provides what (School, Library, Careers). The underlying issue is procedural fairness: rules should feel clear, consistent, and meaningful. Many students did not know why they were flagged; some faced geographical exclusions despite meeting other criteria, and deadlines sometimes closed

before offers were made. After entry, a paradox emerges: being treated the same after being explicitly recognised as different at admission. Signposting often replaces relational support, and advisor churn undermines trust. Students also question ethnicity-only targeting – not because it is irrelevant, but because single-factor invitations feel reductive without socio-economic or other intersectional context. They prefer opt-in models, transparent criteria and timing, and messengers who can act: Schools for skills, advisors for pastoral support, Careers for opportunities. The message is clear: if the institution holds data about need, it should use it to deliver timely, discipline-relevant support that feels respectful and practical.

Illustrative Quotes

“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. I don’t think they know about me, if they do know then I wasn’t told about it”

Habibah

“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

Feeling “Seen and Heard”: Language and Empathy

Support only works when it feels dignified and agency-protecting. Language, delivery, and continuity of relationships determine whether students feel recognised or patronised.

Support is judged not only by what is offered but by how it is framed and delivered. Students differ on labels: some reclaim “WP” with pride, while others find the language or processes patronising. The key factor is dignity. If offers involve intrusive evidence checks or feel like charity, students

disengage; if they are opt-in, clearly worded, and routed through trusted contacts such as advisors or Schools, students respond positively. Belonging is shaped by relationships and infrastructure: peer networks, visible staff representation, and continuity of MAP-style communities into Year 1 help students feel recognised. Targeted programmes done well such as Manchester 10/10, which students describe as personal and inclusive, are valued, but small cohorts do not address wider structural barriers. At the core is mattering: students want support that acknowledges real constraints like time poverty and commuting, while protecting agency so they can participate without hiding who they are. Interventions should consider how it feels at the point of delivery with consideration as to whether it conveys respect, maintains agency, and makes participation easier?

Illustrative Quotes

“I find it empowering to reclaim the term WP – I own it and I take pride in it; it pushes me to work harder. There’s no shame associated with it”

Khalilah

“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

Discussion: Mechanisms of Inequality

Through these four themes emerge three interlocking, co-dependent mechanisms that maintain, and often intensify, inequalities in the student experience: 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.

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, 2020). 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). 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.

Contact, then, is relational and symbolic rather than merely procedural. It is not enough that support exists behind an open office door or a posted email address; students must perceive it as accessible and intend to use it. This resonates with the idea of a relationship-rich education: human 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).

However, contact with the institution was not always relied on. In our dataset, students referred to an amelioration of the demands of managing their widening participation circumstances through the simple 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 unravelled. Indeed, students towards the end of their degree consistently remarked that time was the biggest factor in helping them navigate university life as a widening participation student. 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.

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. Constraint emerges through the layering of ordinary frictions: 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 widening participation students may still be operating with little slack, meaning that strong performance can mask the underlying load until a disruption (illness, crisis, timetable clash, financial shock) exposes how little margin they have to absorb additional demands. 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.

Students 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. This perspective dovetails with studies on student finance and work, which find that 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; Office for Students, 2023). In short, constraint as a mechanism highlights that “equal” provision on paper can reinforce inequality if it demands more time, knowledge, and emotional bandwidth than some students can spare.

Chance

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. 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. In our findings, chance was visible in the contrasts students drew. Some could point to a key moment when things “clicked” thanks to 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 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 opacity. Indeed, these accounts suggest that opportunity is dependent on fortuitous encounters and interactions rather than being embedded in systematic, formal structures. Consequently, access is shaped by contingency rather than equity.

A further dimension to the role of luck emerged in a more paradoxical sense. Students at the apex of meeting all widening participation criteria reported receiving consistent financial, pastoral, and social support from targeted university-based initiatives. This contrasted sharply with students who are marginally disadvantaged and on the periphery of need being left feeling unsupported and forgotten about. The implication of this points to a form of perverse luck; students must be significantly disadvantaged before gaining access to specialist intervention support. Ironically, the students who reported the most positive university experiences amongst our dataset came from those who were benefitting from visible, regular support teams, precisely because they were identified as the most disadvantaged. 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'. 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".

Interplay between the mechanisms

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, 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 only reach some students by chance, those who miss out are left with constraints unaddressed, which can feed back into the cycle. This compounding dynamic is consistent with engagement models that locate student experience at the intersection of structural conditions and relational/pedagogic encounters (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

Impact

This project has created a rich data bank capturing the lived experiences of students from widening participation backgrounds (Appendix A). Our hope is that these insights will inform practice at a pivotal time of strategic alignment around the Access and Participation Plan (APP) and the Manchester 2035 vision.

The findings provide an evidence base for colleagues to promote positive change, particularly as new strategic priorities, working groups, and APP activities emerge. We aim for these student stories to reach spheres of influence and contribute to building a more equitable and socially just system.

The project has also reinforced the importance of working in genuine partnership with students—especially those whose voices are often absent from traditional feedback channels. It raises critical questions about how we ensure that students on the periphery, those facing unacknowledged barriers or dismissed as “not trying hard enough,” are heard and supported.

At a local level, the work has strengthened the role of the CATE award-winning Library Student Team, which continues to be an influential force for student partnership. Their conversations, critical perspectives, and energy shaped this project, and I hope they recognise their voices in its outcomes even if individual stories were not directly included. I remain committed to supporting their activities and amplifying their impact.

Finally, the Fellowship has been transformative for my own professional development. Learning to apply research methods such as reflexive thematic analysis was both exciting and demanding, but it has equipped me with new skills that will inform future scholarship. For our Student Partner Intern, this project provided an opportunity to refine qualitative research skills—experience that will serve as a strong foundation for an academic career.

Reflection

Adam

The ambition of this project was always to create a space for students to speak about what it feels like to be the recipients of targeted support. Too often, well-intentioned interventions happen to students rather than with them. In this regard, the project has been a success: it has created a platform and a dataset that can be referenced, built upon, and used to inform future practice.

It has also formalised common concerns and insights from colleagues working in this space into a funded piece of research with a rigorous methodology and sound analysis. Whether this research “moves the dial” will take time to determine. Change in this area requires sustained, multifaceted effort. These are complex problems with complex solutions, but they are problems nonetheless—and institutions with the ambition and talent of ours must be willing to try. The alternative is the status quo, and the snapshot of student stories showcased here demonstrates that this cannot be justified.

Professionally, as a colleague from Professional Services, the Fellowship opened doors to spaces I would otherwise have found difficult to access. Working with talented students—both as partners and through focus groups—reinforced my belief that the future of higher education is in safe hands. The challenge is to keep up. I have learned to be more comfortable with the nature of real-world research: it changes direction, adapts to a shifting educational landscape, and often exists in the cracks between competing priorities.

Rachael

This project has been a tremendous success with respect to giving students a

safe space to be heard, to be seen, and to feel a sense of belonging with others who have experienced similar difficulties and barriers. In doing so, students felt comfortable opening up about their backgrounds and sharing very personal anecdotes and examples of what it means to come from a widening participation background, how that feels, and what still needs to be done to address educational inequalities. At the heart of this work are the students' voices and it is imperative that the University places these at the forefront to guide any future targeted interventions or proposed support mechanisms.

It has been a real privilege to work alongside Adam as a Student Partner and to have been entrusted with many important aspects of this project. Not only have I strengthened my research skills in transcription, understanding of ethics protocols, and thematic data analysis, I feel extremely grateful to have gained such a raw insight into the challenges faced by many students from a widening participation background and to collaboratively explore how these could be addressed moving forwards.

Next steps

There is more to be done in this space. Each generation of students will tell their own stories, and it is vital that they continue to have their voices heard. We will use our influence and networks to create these spaces and disseminate findings as an example of what can be achieved.

Planned actions include:

- Follow-up interviews to explore themes in greater depth and enable a second layer of analysis.

- Conference dissemination: abstracts have been submitted to internal and external conferences, and we will continue to leverage the ITL network to share findings widely.
- Publications and blogs: a TEA blog and further outputs are in development to ensure accessibility and sector impact.

Institutional alignment: as Manchester2035 and new Access and Participation strategies are enacted, we will work to embed these insights into policy and practice.

This is an exciting time to disrupt for change Fellowship and scholarship initiatives can harness the power of networks that cross traditional academic lines, creating transformative opportunities for collaboration and impact.

The final word should be handed to our students who were thoughtful, kind to each other and willing to share to facilitate change for others:

"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

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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)

“For MAP 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 don't think the bursaries really cover that. I don't think they realise how much students struggle." (Joel)

“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)

“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)

Appendix B - Participant data glossary

Abbreviation	Self Identified Widening Participation Status
Disability	Disability – who live with a disability
Ethnicity	Ethnic Background – from underrepresented ethnic backgrounds; from Gypsy, Roma or Traveller communities
First Gen HE	First Generation HE – who are the first in their generation to consider higher education
Low Income	Low Income – from low-income backgrounds
Low HE Area	Low HE Participation Area – from areas where participation in higher education is low
Estranged	Estranged – estranged from their families
Low Performing School	Below National Average School – who attended schools and colleges where performance is below the national average
Care Experienced	Care Experienced – who are care experienced
Refugee / Asylum	Refugee / Asylum Seeker – who are refugees or asylum seekers
Military Family	Military Family – from military families
Young Carer	Young Carer – who are young carers
FG	Attended and took part in a Focus Group
Interview	Interviewed

Appendix B - Participant data

Pseudonym	FG / I	Disability	Ethnicity	First Gen HE	Low Income	Low HE Area	Estranged	Low Performing School	Care Experienced	Refugee / Asylum	Military Family	Young Carer
Emily	FG	X	X									
Chloe	FG		X	X								
Malala	FG		X	X	X	X						
Jeanette	FG	X	X	X	X	X	X					
Farah	FG		X		X		X					
Penny	FG			X	X	X		X				
Holly	FG					X						
Alara	FG			X	X		X					
Philippa	FG			X	X	X		X				
Sharon	FG		X		X	X						
Mei	FG					X						
Aaliyah	FG			X	X	X						

Appendix B - Participant data glossary

Pseudonym	FG / I	Disability	Ethnicity	First Gen HE	Low Income	Low HE Area	Estranged	Low Performing School	Care Experienced	Refugee / Asylum	Military Family	Young Carer
Zara	FG	X		X	X	X			X			
Melissa	FG		X	X	X				X			
Habibah	FG	X	X		X							
Karima	FG		X	X	X							
Grace	FG		X	X	X	X						
Imogen	FG	X		X	X	X						
Cristina	FG	X		X	X							
Laila	FG		X		X			X				
Makena	FG		X		X	X						
Karabo	FG				X	X						
Madison	FG			X	X				X			
Isra	FG		X	X	X	X		X				

Appendix B - Participant data glossary

Pseudonym	FG/I	Disability	Ethnicity	First Gen HE	Low Income	Low HE Area	Estranged	Low Performing School	Care Experienced	Refugee / Asylum	Military Family	Young Carer
Athena	FG		X	X	X							
Georgia	FG			X	X	X						
Penelope	FG				X	X		X				
Aida	FG		X	X	X	X		X				X
Omar	FG		X	X	X							
Arya	FG			X	X	X		X				
Sophie	FG				X	X						
Darius	FG		X	X	X	X		X				
Phoebe	FG		X		X	X		X				
Salma	FG				X	X						
Thomas	FG+I		X	X	X	X		X				
Daisy	FG+I				X	X		X				

Appendix B - Participant data glossary

Pseudonym	FG / I	Disability	Ethnicity	First Gen HE	Low Income	Low HE Area	Estranged	Low Performing School	Care Experienced	Refugee / Asylum	Military Family	Young Carer
Joel	FG + I			X	X	X		X				X
Khalilah	FG + I	X	X	X	X	X	X	X				
Jasmine	I			X	X	X		X				
Maisy	I	X		X	X	X		X				
Rana	I		X		X	X		X		X		
Emma	I			X	X	X		X				
Hiba	I									X		
Charlotte	I											
Elaine	I		X	X	X	X	X	X				
Amelia	I		X	X			X					
Jonathon	I		X									
Shantelle	I	X	X		X							

Appendix B - Participant data glossary

Pseudonym	FG / I	Disability	Ethnicity	First Gen HE	Low Income	Low HE Area	Estranged	Low Performing School	Care Experienced	Refugee / Asylum	Military Family	Young Carer
Isla	I										X	
Becky	I				X	X	X		X			

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