



Contact, Constraint and Chance: Understanding Inequality in Higher Education

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WHY THIS PROJECT MATTERS

From access and outcomes to lived experience...

Widening participation is often assessed through access and outcomes, but this can overlook how inequality is experienced and produced through everyday university processes.

So, this project aims to address this oversight.

- It explores students' experience of being on the receiving end of support — across belonging, material conditions, institutional processes and communication.
- And it shifts attention from whether support exists to whether students can recognise, access and use it in practice.

Our Study

Participants

- 50 university students from a WP background, aged 18 - 40
- All self-identified with at least one WP criterion

Method

- Focus groups and interviews (semi-structured)

Analysis

- Reflexive thematic analysis: 4 themes and 3 mechanisms identified



Theme 1

“People Like Us”: Identity, Class and Belonging

Students feel difference in accent, clothing and confidence. This shapes voice, attendance and sense of belonging.

Theme 2

The Price of Participation

Paid work, unpaid placements and hidden costs ration access to lectures, placements, and extra-curricular life.

Theme 3

Widening Participation: “Getting In” vs “Getting on”

Contextual entry support opens doors; after entry, students need clearer hand-offs, continuity and joined-up advice.

Theme 4

Feeling Seen and Heard: Language and Empathy

Support is effective when it is personalised and clearly communicated. It risks failing when it is generic, tokenistic, or disconnected from students’ lived experiences.

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

Persistent sense of difference — accent, clothing, confidence.

Comparisons are relational (“people like us” vs “people like them”), embodied (voice, mannerisms) and shaped by context (e.g. contextual offers, commuter status).

Belonging is not automatic — it is actively managed, often at personal cost.

Students described “masking” and uncertainty around whether they were legitimate members of the university, shaping how they participate.

Shows up in the academic space:

“ *It made me a lot quieter in seminars* — Khalilah

“ *Feeling like I didn’t belong impacted me... I watched lectures online instead* — Charlotte

The Price of Participation

Structural scarcity of time and money creates tangible limits on engagement.

Participation is not just academic — it has material costs that shape what students can realistically take part in.

Part-time work → missed lectures and rationed access to extra-curricular activities

Placements → weeks without pay, hidden travel and clothing costs

These pressures accumulate rather than operate in isolation.

“ For our course, we do six weeks of placement... you’re losing those six weeks where you can’t work — Madison

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

“Getting in” relates to institutional processes: contextual offers, flagging criteria and targeted WP schemes.

Students draw a clear distinction between access and navigation.

After entry, a paradox emerges: being treated the same despite being recognised as different at admission.

“We have to put in extra work just to stand on the same ground” — Khalilah

“Getting on” concerns advisor continuity, being passed around internal systems and clarity over who provides what.

Support becomes harder to find, interpret and act on after entry.

Students want institutional knowledge of need translated into timely, transparent, discipline-relevant support.

Feeling Seen and Heard: Language and Empathy

Language around WP is viewed positively when support is opt-in, clearly worded and routed through trusted contacts.

When done well, being identified for support is experienced as recognition rather than labelling.

Otherwise, WP efforts can feel:

Targeted programmes are valued for confidence and connection:

“ *To build my confidence / to make friends from the same background as me* — Amelia and Daisy

Support lands when it feels personal and meaningful, and misses when it feels generic or one-size-fits-all.

Students also highlighted the risk of treating WP as a single, homogenous group.

“ *Tokenistic / associated with charity* — Jasmine and Jonathon

Mechanisms of Inequality in Student Experience

Contact:

Who students feel able to approach, and whether support is visible, approachable and meaningful.

Constraint:

The limits on time, money and energy that shape whether students can act on opportunities or support.

Chance:

The role of informal networks, timing and being in the right place to access support and opportunity.



These mechanisms overlap and reinforce each other, shaping whether students can access and benefit from university provision.

Rethinking Inequality

- Inequality in HE is reproduced through how students reach support, act on it, and encounter opportunity.
- Time, money and access limit what participation looks like in practice
- Support becomes fragmented after entry, increasing the burden of navigation
- Communication determines whether support is recognised, trusted and used

This shifts the focus from access alone to experience.

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We're in the same place, but our lives are worlds apart. I have to fight for every step



Thank you and Q&A

This project aims to centre student experience and open up conversations about how support is designed and delivered. The challenge is not just providing support, but ensuring it is usable in practice.

We welcome reflections, questions and discussion

How do these themes resonate in your context?

Where might similar patterns be visible in your own practice?

What would need to change to reduce reliance on contact, constraint and chance?

